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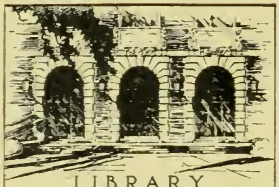

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A MODERN

DICK WHITTINGTON;

OR,

A PATRON OF LETTERS.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD," "BY PROXY," &c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

CASSELL & COMPANY, LIMITED:
LONDON, PARIS & MELBOURNE.
1892.

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A MODERN DICK WHITTINGTON.

CHAPTER XXII.

KITTY IS NOT SANGUINE.

What had seemed so strange and even painful to Ruth—that her cousin had not been the first to tell her of the good fortune that had befallen him—had been to Lawrence the most natural thing in the world. He had wanted to tell her and to tell his mother also—he had hardly slept for thinking of it, and yearned to communicate it to all who took an interest in his affairs—but the very importance it had in his eyes made him feel that it was due to Kitty that she should be the first to know it. For did it not concern her more than anyone else? Was it not the very tidings, unexpected and beyond all hope, that would make the course of true love to run smooth?

She loved him—though he admitted to himself less passionately than he loved her—and the sole obstacle to her acceptance of him had been a material one. She knew nothing—and indeed cared nothing—of literary affairs, and his idea of gaining a livelihood by his pen had seemed to her little better than a dream. It was a disappointment to him, of course, that it was so; that she had no sympathy with his ambition, and valued fame at a much lower rate than the philosophers pretend to estimate it; but now that he had something tangible to show her—his ten-pound note—and the editor's encouragement to tell her about, his pretensions surely stood on entirely different and far firmer ground.

Directly after breakfast he flew on the wings of love to Kitty's abode. Mr. Salesby, who had been drinking his own health—though with little benefit to it—pretty constantly from the hour at which he had learnt the good news from Epsom Downs, had not yet come down, and the young lady was alone at the breakfast table waiting for him. She was not impatient, but sat with her pretty face resting on her hands, in thought; it was their pressure against her velvet cheeks,

perhaps, that gave them unaccustomed colour, but they were certainly more roseate than usual; her eyes, on the other hand, were less bright than ordinary; they were fixed upon the not over white cloth beneath them in dreamy abstraction. It was not her habit to be so self-involved. As a rule she seldom gave way to reflection of any kind, as she had little that was pleasant to think about; and the result on the present occasion had apparently been far from satisfactory. She had been weeping. So lost was she in thought that she had not heard Lawrence's step on the garden walk, and only by his opening the front door without knocking guessed who was the visitor. In a single instant she had dried her eyes, and as he entered the room was pouring herself out a cup of tea.

"What, alone?" cried the young fellow joyously; "this is luck, indeed; kiss me, my darling Kitty—why, what's the matter?"

He had passed his arm round her waist in the most natural way in the world, and was leaning over her shoulder to kiss her, when she shook herself free from him.

"Only that you've scalded me, and spoilt the

tablecloth," she answered pettishly, but with a certain gravity of manner too. "I told you that you were not to do that any more."

"Did you?" he said with a pleasant smile. "Well, if you did it was under a mistake, my dear, and you will have to pay me back my kiss with interest. I have brought you news that will absolve me for fifty kisses."

"News? What news?" Her curiosity was excited in spite of herself. She had fixed upon a certain course of conduct in her own mind as regarded Lawrence, but there were possibilities which might alter that. It was foolish of her to have imagined anything of the kind, and she repented of it immediately, but for the instant his evident happiness and enthusiasm had misled her. She had scarcely known what to think had happened. But, as sitting close beside her, with his eager eyes looking into her own, he poured into her ear his glorious news, she showed no corresponding emotion. She gave him her attention, and that was all. Even when he produced the ten-pound note, which, as the first money he had ever earned, as well as the earnest of future fortune, seemed to him wealth and fame in one, it

awoke scarcely a ray of interest. But though his story failed in its intent, the manner of his telling it, and above all the contiguity of his bright face, and the touch of his hand as he placed it lightly on her arm by way of emphasis, were not without their influence. Though his arguments failed, their appeal was not unanswered; she could not prevent stealing a tender look at him from time to time, and this blinded him to the indifference with which she regarded his tidings.

"So you see, darling, that what you thought so impossible has actually come to pass," he said, when all had been told, "and nothing now prevents you from giving me your first kiss, as my promised bride, in exchange for this one," and he kissed her.

She jumped up from her chair with scarlet face, and a look in her eyes that was half anger and half shame.

"You have no right to do that, Lawrence, and I won't have it," she exclaimed with vehemence.

"No right? Why, that is just what I *have* got, and had not before," said Lawrence naïvely, for in fact it was not his first salute by many.

"You have got nothing of the kind," she answered, keeping him at a distance with one hand, while she pressed the other to her bosom, where indeed wild work was going on, and such as needed a pacificator. "There is nothing in what you have said, though, of course, I am glad to hear it for your sake, to alter our relations to one another. Do you suppose that we can marry upon ten pounds?"

The last sentence was much more confidently stated than the first; of the profits of literature she knew nothing, but as regarded the expenses of housekeeping she was at home.

"But that is only the first dip in the lucky bag, Kitty; there is plenty more where that came from, and Sir Charles has a plan in his head which will put the whole thing to proof in a very little while."

"What has Sir Charles to do with it?" she answered curtly. "I mean what can he do for you more than he has done?"

"Well, he suggested that I should leave Hillsland and go up to London at once."

"Indeed!" She resumed her seat, but farther away from her impassioned swain than

before, and began smoothing away the folds on the tablecloth.

"Yes. I am to go home with him for the present."

"To Hurlby Castle," she interrupted hastily. "You?"

"It is not such a very great honour," he answered, in a tone of wounded pride. "I assure you Sir Charles himself would be the last to look upon it in that light. He has no other design, of course, than to do me a service; but he is so good as to say it will please him to have me as his guest; it is not a piece of mere patronage as you are thinking. As a man of letters I may hold up my head some day as high as he does. I wish I could get you to understand that, Kitty, dear."

"And how long are you to stay at Hurlby?" she inquired; she seemed interested enough in that question, though she ignored his remark about the social status of literary persons altogether.

"Well, not more than a day or two, I suppose. The fact is Sir Charles's invitation is only a blind; for I shall be up in town while

my grandfather and the rest believe me to be at the Castle. I shall be trying my wings, as it were, and if I find that they will bear one, they will very soon be able to bear two."

"Did Sir Charles say *that?*" inquired Kitty coldly.

"Why, of course not. How should he know how dearly I love you, and what is my chief aim and object in becoming independent? In a few months—even in a few weeks perhaps—I may give you such proofs of my fitness for the calling I have chosen that you will be running scarcely any risk at all in letting me call you mine. I had hoped that the news I brought this morning would have been sufficient to at least make you reconsider the answer you gave me the other day."

"I don't like risks, Lawrence; and I have had quite enough of poverty," she replied drily. "If my father happens to gain a little money such as your ten-pound note—it goes as lightly as it comes. I hate what are called 'narrow means;' I am not made for them; I don't wish to study economy all my life; to look after the shillings and sixpences; I like you very well, Lawrence, dear——"

"Like me!" he cried aghast. "You have said you loved me! And you do love me, Kitty? Come, confess you do love me just a little bit."

He hitched his chair closer to her, and laid his hand upon her arm beseechingly. She trembled and turned pale; and in hollow broken tones replied—

"I don't know what I have said. You think too much of it, whatever it was, and of me also. I tell you I am not fit to be the wife of a poor man."

"But, my dear Kitty, where are you to find a rich one? You used to reprove me for having dreams, and yet, I am surely nearer to their realisation, than you are to what you have in your mind. If it were a matter of alternative, I should not have a word to say, but to throw me over——"

"I have not thrown you over," she put in quickly.

"Well, to deny me hope, with even less than hope in the scale against me, to say you prefer a possible chance of marrying some wealthy stranger to risking poverty with the

man you love—that is monstrous. Besides, it is not so certain—and that is the very point—that I shall always be a poor man. Why, when I came up here—to tell you of it first of all, before my mother even and Ruth—I said to myself, Kitty will have no excuse now; for that she loves me dearly—though not so much as I love her, because that's impossible—I know. And now—why, what's the matter, Kitty?"

The tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she dashed them away with both hands. "Nothing," she cried. "Here's father coming." And a little pink as to the eyes, and a little white as to the gills, and with a general air of difficulty as to the tie of his neckcloth, Mr. Salesby entered the room.

"You here, young gentleman," he exclaimed coolly enough, but not ungraciously; "you're an early bird—after the worm, I suppose?" and he nodded with much gravity towards his daughter.

"I brought some news for Kitty. There is some little probability of my having a start in life, you will be glad to hear."

"Aye, aye; drop the flag and all together,

there's nothing like a fair start. But it is a long cruise to Singapore."

"But I hope I'm going to London; though it's quite a private matter."

"Oh, oh, so *you* are taken into confidence are you. Then matters must be even worse than I thought they were. Daren't show ourselves at Tattersall's, but send over nevvy and representative to arrange matters, eh? Well, mind you look sharp after your commission, my lad, or the squire will bilk you. There's Dick Salesby's tip for *that* event. The eggs are cold, and the bacon's hard, Kitty."

"I am sorry, father, but you are very late."

"The man of means—that is with ready money—gets up when he likes, Kit. I only wish it would last. Yes, my boy; here is no doubt your chance; the squire will not dare to stand in your way with grandpapa, if you know his little secrets. I suppose 'Mum's' the word, or I should like to know how much he is in for."

"Indeed, Mr. Salesby, I know nothing about my uncle's affairs."

"Close as wax, eh? Quite right." Then Mr. Salesby began talking about the Ascot

Cup, which to Lawrence was Greek, and even Hebrew. It was evidently no use to prolong his visit, and after an ineffectual attempt to persuade Kitty to come out for a walk, he took his leave.

It had been a most unsatisfactory and disappointing business. He had still no doubt of Kitty's affection; but it was clear she yet doubted of his ability to make his way in the world. He felt that unless he could procure some definite and permanent means of livelihood, she would hesitate to pledge herself to him. As to her father, he was not inimical to his views, but it was impossible to explain to him the ground of his literary expectations and useless to persuade him of the mistake he was under as to his relations with Uncle Robert. Indeed, it was better to leave him in it, since, for the time at least, it rendered Mr. Salesby more favourable to his hopes.

In a very different frame of mind from that with which he had started from home that morning, Lawrence sought the moorland with languid steps.

Upon its breezy top perhaps some more

cheerful reflections would present themselves, and at all events he was in no humour for society; the news that had been so good to him an hour before, seemed no longer worth communicating to anybody. As he reached the brow of the hill he saw a horseman coming towards him. If there had been time to have avoided him he would have done so—though he recognised him at once as his best and oldest friend—but there was no time, the recognition indeed had been mutual.

Mr. Percy, for it was no other than his old tutor, was already waving his riding whip, and uttering some cheerful salutation which the wind carried away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN OLD FRIEND.

The Rev. Gerald Percy, rector of Westerham, the neighbouring parish, formed a strong contrast to his brother divine of Hillsland. He was one of the handsomest men in the Church of England—tall and well formed, with grey hair that curled over his ample brows like a middle-aged Antinous. He was one of the survivors of the school of muscular Christianity, and as good in the cricket field and on the quoiting green as in the pulpit. The only fault he had found with Lawrence, when he was his pupil, was that the young fellow's tastes had not been sufficiently athletic. He believed that wholesomeness of life had a close connection with the exercise of the muscles, and even instanced St. Paul's metaphors from pedestrianism as a proof of it. Our professional athlete scarcely bears out his

theory, but it did not enter into his mind that a time should come when hardly a match of any sort could be engaged in without there being "money upon it."

Though little versed in modern literature, he was a fair scholar, and a gentleman down to his finger tips. The Church was his wife, and his flock was his family, and a more unselfish being it would have been hard to find. His interest in Lawrence was a proof of it, for indeed they had little in common; but he had perceived the youth to be cast in an uncommon mould, and liked him none the less because of their points of difference. In one matter he had taken great pains with him, where difference, in persons of Mr. Percy's calling, is often fatal to influence, namely, in religious faith. Lawrence, though affectionate by nature, had the scepticism common to men of his peculiar temperament, and his tutor had treated it very tenderly; he even understood that it arose out of good ground, though the root might be unsubstantial and the trunk awry. Many a talk they had together over "Fate, free-will, fore-knowledge absolute," conducted on the one side with the most admirable

gentleness and forbearance, and on the other with fire and freedom.

There was nothing which Lawrence would not have told his tutor of his innermost thoughts on these matters, so certain he felt of his sympathy, yet strangely enough there were other secrets of his heart which he would rather have disclosed to almost any other man than he. He had been confidential enough about them with Sir Charles—to whom he would have been chary indeed of conversing upon spiritual matters—but to Mr. Percy he would not have dreamt of saying one word about Miss Kitty Salesby. Not that he was ashamed of her, of course, or of his love for her, but because the whole affair was surreptitious and underhand, and must remain so, no matter what arguments the reverend gentleman might (and certainly would) advance to the contrary. The same reason he felt must prevent him from hinting at what stood almost as near to his mind, namely, that expedition under false pretences into the world of letters in London. Unfortunately, it was with something akin to that very subject that Mr. Percy commenced the conversation.

"Well, Lawrence, my lad, have you taken the heights of Parnassus by storm yet?"

"Not exactly," returned the lad smiling, "*non omnino sed pene.*"

"Come, I'm glad you remember your Latin; but how near have you got to Parnassus? Are you writing for the Sunday papers?"

"I wish I were," returned Lawrence naïvely, "but I am happy to say there is a chance of my doing so."

"Eh, what? come tell me," said the parson, dropping his reins on the neck of his discreet nag, and regarding his young friend very kindly. "You know that if I have not always approved of your aspirations I have always sympathised with them."

"I know that indeed, sir, quite well," said Lawrence gratefully. The slender barriers of reticence had been broken down at once by this appeal to his feelings; and he forthwith told the rector (what he had not intended to tell him) of his sending his MSS. to the London editor, and how they had fared.

"But how came you to know of this Mr. Latham, who seems to have given you encourage-

ment, though you must not count too much upon it. It is Walter Scott, I think, who tells us that literature is a good walking-stick, but a very indifferent crutch."

"Well, Sir Charles Walden was so good as to give me a recommendation to him; he is staying at the Hall just now."

"So I have heard," returned the rector drily; "and he takes an interest in you, does he, for his own sake, of course?"

"I venture to think he does, sir, since literary matters, he tells me, though he has an excellent taste in them, are not much in his line."

The rector smiled, not by any means in his usual genial way. "You have found a strange doorkeeper to the Temple of Fame, my lad."

"At all events a very kind one," put in Lawrence quickly. "But for him the door might never have been opened."

"Just so, and he has taken all this trouble—and he is a man who does not like trouble—solely upon your own account."

"It seems so. Indeed he has been so good as to invite me to return home with him next week."

"To Hurlby? I cannot say I am pleased to hear it."

"Why not, sir?"

"Well, it is rather difficult to say, but for one thing it suggests a family connection which I cannot but think far from desirable."

"A family connection?" exclaimed Lawrence with amazement.

"Well, you surely cannot be ignorant of the common report that links Sir Charles's name with that of your cousin."

"With Ruth?" replied the young man with indignation. "It is the silliest of all silly talk."

But even while he said the words the conversation of the previous evening recurred to him; the sensitiveness which Sir Charles had shown upon the subject of age, and the suspicion it had at the time excited in his own breast. Still, even now—though less perhaps from the unlikelihood of such a thing, than from its disagreeableness—he did not seriously think "there was anything in it." "Why, Sir Charles is old enough to be her grandfather."

He had said that before to himself, and conviction had followed upon it; but now

that he said it aloud, it did not appear so convincing.

The rector nodded an acquiescence, but so very gravely that the nod seemed to say: "And the inequality of age is not the worst of it."

Lawrence did not wish to enter upon that subject, his loyalty to his patron forbad it; but it was impossible to shake off the suspicion that the other had excited.

"Then you think that all the kindness Sir Charles has shown me has been caused by self-interest; that he wishes to ingratiate himself with me in order that I may say a good word for him to my cousin."

"I don't say that; I will not assert that I never heard of Sir Charles Walden doing anything creditable without a *quid pro quo*, because I never heard of his doing it at all; but I certainly think it unlikely."

The force and severity of the censure, coming from such a quarter, fell upon Lawrence's ear almost like a blow, but he instantly remembered the coldness with which Sir Charles had received the mention of Mr. Percy's name when he had spoken of him as having been his tutor, and it

struck him—with some sense of relief—that the two men must have had some personal quarrel.

"I am sorry you think so ill, sir, of one who has been so good to me," he answered sorrowfully. "I am under great obligations to him."

"He has not lent you money, I do hope," said the rector earnestly. "My purse is a slender one, as you know, Lawrence, but it is at your service, and it will be much better for you, believe me, to be indebted to me than to him."

"Indeed, sir, there has been nothing of the kind between us. The suggestion convinces me of your misjudgment of him; he is a man of the greatest delicacy of mind."

"Really?" There was a folio of sarcasm in that single word, but the speaker did not continue the subject. "And how long do you propose to stay at Hurlby?"

It was an unfortunate question. Lawrence had not the slightest scruple about deceiving his Uncle Robert or Aunt Jane, but with Mr. Percy it cost him a struggle not to be frank. "That is not settled, sir, but probably only a few days," he replied hesitatingly.

"Well, well, you will at least remember, if

this new friend of yours should fall short of your expectations that you have an older one, who so far as he is able to help you, can be depended upon. It is possible that outside the regions of periodical literature—with which it seems this gentleman has so unexpected an acquaintance—my advice may be useful to you. I hope you will apply to me, my dear lad, in any trouble, as readily as you would have done in the old times."

The speaker's tone was earnest as well as tender; it had also a certain warning note in it, as though he foresaw the trouble at which he hinted.

If he had not succeeded in setting Lawrence on his guard against the baronet, he had certainly shaken his faith in him; the young fellow's *amour propre* was wounded by the suggestion that Sir Charles's interest in him, if not actually feigned, was mainly owing to a selfish motive. Another shadow had fallen upon the prospects which had dawned upon him that morning so brightly. He had the artistic temperament at least, however he might fall short in other attributes, and was as easily depressed

as elevated. He was grateful, of course, to his old tutor for his offers of assistance and advice, and expressed himself to that effect, but it was evident enough that he wished they—or rather the suggestion that they might be needed—had never been made.

"You are coming on to the Hall, I hope," said Lawrence, it must be owned with no great enthusiasm of welcome.

"No, my lad, no; not while you have company there. Besides, I have business at the mines. Remember what I have said, and whatever you do, or wherever you go, God bless you, my lad."

And the rector laid his hand upon his old pupil's head as though to accentuate the benediction.

It was certainly very unfortunate, reflected Lawrence, as he turned towards home, that the only two men in the world whom he could call his friends were on such bad terms with one another

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN CHURCH.

That Saturday evening was the first one since Sir Charles's arrival at the Hall that he failed to come to Lawrence's room with his little portmanteau full of cigars in the evening. Perhaps, he had got a little tired of conversing upon a young man's literary prospects in London, and at all events there was excuse enough in the fact that Lawrence and he were both bound for Hurlby Castle on the Monday, and would have plenty of time there for conversation. Far from any objection to the baronet's invitation having been raised by Uncle Robert, he had received the news with effusion; as for setting it down to any regard entertained by Sir Charles for the lad himself, he had even less belief in it than Mr. Percy, and attributed it to the self-same cause. The man, he thought, must be pretty far gone

with Miss Ruth, since merely to please her he had shown such civility to her young cub of a cousin. The news, indeed, pleased him immensely, since it gave him ground for believing that the same tender motive would induce his guest to accommodate him with that little loan which his ill-luck on the turf had rendered so absolutely necessary. What was £5,000 to a man of Sir Charles's wealth? Let alone the pleasure it must give him to have the opportunity of obliging a gentleman about to be so nearly connected with him by family ties.

The conviction, however, that this little matter would be happily settled did not prevent the squire from bemoaning his ill-fortune, and cursing his friend the parson for having caused him by his slipshod telegram to believe for the moment that he had won instead of lost. None of us are thankful for the brief hour of happiness caused by a mistake of that nature, but are rather prone to dwell upon the disappointment that follows. But for the vicar, the squire would never have made a fool of himself in visiting Mr. Salesby and involuntarily making him the confidant of his trouble; of the magnitude

of this mistake, indeed, he had probably no conception, but he felt the importance of keeping the matter from getting abroad.

From the few passionate words he had dashed off in haste to Mr. Grueby, that gentleman would probably gather the squire's feelings towards him, and that he had not replied to them, or been in any hurry to return to Hillsland till the week was up, was not surprising. Moreover, when Mr. Grueby found himself in "the village," which was his playful term for London, he always stopped there as long as he could, though, owing to the loss of his own "half-crowns" upon the Derby favourite, he was not in a position on the present occasion to embroider his holiday with the usual amusements. Thus it happened that the first time Mr. Robert Stratton beheld his clerical friend after their common misfortune was in his own pulpit at Hillsland.

The squire always went to church, as a duty owing to his position, though on this particular Sunday he was more actuated by the thought of what he owed to Mr. Grueby. Mr. Salesby, which was by no means so usual, was also there;

he, too, was eager for discourse with the vicar as an eye-witness of those proceedings at Epsom which had terminated so satisfactorily in his own case; and Lawrence was there because Kitty would be there; so various are the motives that actuate people in their attendance at public worship.

Before service Mr. Grueby was not to be approached; he had avoided all temptations of secular-conversation by shutting himself up in the vestry.

"I suppose," said Mr. Salesby, with a most impudent smile, to the squire when they met in the churchyard, "that the vicar will take for his text to-day, How the race is not always to the swift; he must have Ganymede a good deal upon his mind."

The squire, who had Ganymede still more upon *his* mind, grinned a ghastly smile, which Miss Jane rebuked with a frown, under the mistaken impression that he was indulging in ill-timed levity. None of the Hall party who trooped into the family pew that morning could be reasonably accused of that crime, though their thoughts might not have been occupied as they

should have been. Mrs. Merridew was thinking of her son, and whether or no he would ever again stand beside her in that sacred place. He had told her of his plans for the future, in which she had but little hope. It was true that she understood nothing of the chances of a literary career, but she foresaw that if he failed in it even that wretched offer of a post at Singapore might be withdrawn by "the family," and his attempt to better himself be made the excuse for their washing their hands of him altogether. She knew by "harsh evidence" that it would give pleasure to both his uncle and aunt to see the young fellow cast off by his grandfather, who, for his part, cared nothing about him one way or the other. To his mother, on the other hand—such different values do we set upon one another in this world!—the lad was the last strand that bound her to the shore of life. Of his tenderness for Kitty she had heard from Aunt Jerry, but that matter did not disturb her as it had disturbed her informant. Aunt Jerry was jealous of Lawrence upon Ruth's account, which Mrs. Merridew was not. She loved her niece, and would gladly indeed have had her for a daughter-

in-law; but she was less ignorant of the world than Mrs. Lock, and knew that such a union was entirely out of the question. Ruth was penniless as Kitty was, but her family would infinitely more resent the young fellow's engagement with her than with Kitty, inasmuch as a good match, from which moreover they themselves would profit, was expected of her.

Ruth, who sat behind Mrs. Merridew, had her mind fixed upon the same subject, but regarded it from a very different standpoint. The most interesting object in the church for her that morning, one regrets to say, was by no means the officiating minister; she strove in vain to fix her wandering thoughts upon the service: to keep her wandering gaze upon the Prayer Book. They would stray in spite of herself to Mr. Salesby's pew, where Kitty sat, calm and serene, to all appearance the model of a church-goer. Up to the present time she had awakened but little interest in Ruth; her ways were not Ruth's ways, and she had received her good-natured advances towards acquaintanceship with something like rudeness. She knew that Ruth felt nothing but kindness for her, pity for her

position, for the life that with a gambling and drunken father, and without one female friend in the world, was so certainly "on the down-grade," and she resented it. She was not going to be "patronised" by any member of the family at the Hall, however harmless and well-meaning. There had even been a time when she had regarded Ruth with dislike and jealousy; she suspected her, quite justly as it happened, though upon the slightest grounds, of being in love with Lawrence; and though she herself had never had any serious intention of encouraging the young fellow, she was quite willing to be the object of his adoration, and preferred it to be undivided. It was a dog-in-the-manger like sentiment, but young ladies in much higher circles than those in which Miss Kate Salesby moved have been known to entertain it.

Her feelings, however, had since undergone a change; she would still rather have married Lawrence Merridew than any other man, young or old, she had ever seen; but her mind, as she had disclosed to him, was practical; she was still, after a fashion, in love with him, but she was not in love with poverty, and she did not

believe in literature as the way out of it; his devotion, in short, if not absolutely unwelcome, had become extremely embarrassing to her. In his presence she found it difficult to resist him; but in his absence tolerably easy to forget him. In her heart of hearts—if Miss Kitty could be said to possess such a sanctuary—she was glad that he was going away.

Of these sentiments, of course, Ruth knew nothing; what she was saying to herself instead of the responses, was "Is it possible dear Lawrence loves that girl? She is pretty, she has a beautiful figure; I dare say that a man, who knows no better, will think she is well dressed, but can a fine mind like his be seriously attracted by her?" Upon the whole she came to the agreeable conclusion that it couldn't. And then unfortunately she caught a glance of Lawrence's halfway on its road to Kitty, and with a twinge at her heart that seemed to paralyse her very being, came to the contrary opinion. Aunt Jerry was right then after all, Lawrence would be content it seemed with

> "A lower range of feeling,
> A narrower heart than hers."

It was a terrible reflection for her, and little mitigated by the fact, which had, however, by no means escaped her observation, that Kitty did not return his glances. She was fully occupied, as any young woman in church was bound to be, with her Prayer Book. *She* was not looking furtively about her to see whither young men were glancing; but *that*, thought poor Ruth, might be only too easily explained by the fact that she felt quite secure of the object of her affections, and knew where *he* was looking—as one feels the sunbeam without turning one's eyes.

Unconscious of the surveillance that was being exercised over him, it was only too true that Lawrence strove and strove again to win an answering glance from Kitty, as an angler throws his line again and again for a shy trout. Not that Kitty could be said to be shy, but only resolute to take no notice of his attentions. Even when given to understand that they were purposely ignored, his glances circled round her pew like doves about a dove-cote, taking in all that the old-fashioned house of prayer afforded to the eye. They lit upon the Ten Command-

ments printed in old-fashioned style upon the whitewashed wall; on the row of leathern fire-buckets which hung from the cross-beams; on the tablets to the memory of long-forgotten magnates; on the sounding-board of the pulpit even, with its fringe of cobwebs; nothing escaped him; for even in spite of himself Lawrence Merridew was an observer.

In after years, when everything had altered with him, and his whole life was turning on an undreamt-of pivot, that last visit of his to the old church often returned to him with great distinctness. For resent it though we may, it is the material scenes of our lives that remain to us, and survive to the last, while our hopes and fears, our beliefs and aspirations (which seem each in their turn of such monopolising importance), change or die and are forgotten. There is a well-known saw: "It will be all the same a hundred years hence," and though in fact it will not be the same but entirely different, the saying in its intended sense is a true one; only instead of a hundred years one may write ten, a space of time quite sufficient in most human lives for a complete revolution.

The only person apparently quite untroubled in mind in the Hall pew—for Miss Jane, though extremely devout herself, was very solicitous about the shortcoming of her fellow-creatures in that matter, and kept a sharp eye on the gallery where the servants sat—was Sir Charles Walden. He was very much "at his ease in Zion;" not in the least impressed by the circumstance of his being in a house of worship, but nevertheless interested in it, as a novelty. The bassoon—or rather the man that played it and seemed part and portion of this instrument—attracted his attention; and also the man that slept the sleep of the just in its immediate vicinity, and rivalled its performances with his nose. A smile flitted across the baronet's features at every whack of the cane administered by the sexton to the schoolboys, who, seated on open forms in the aisle—dangerously subject to observation, yet could not resist cracking the furtive nut, and polishing the favourite marble. When subsequently asked by Miss Jane how he had liked "the service," Sir Charles had been within an hair's breadth of replying that he had been very much amused, but with his usual tact and readiness he

had pulled up on the edge of the precipice and expressed his admiration of the choir, which he knew to be under her especial patronage. This happened as they were walking back from church, for no carriage ever left the Hall on the Sabbath day; Sir Charles and Miss Jane—the most unsympathetic couple that could probably be found within the four seas—leading the van, and Mrs. Merridew, Ruth, and Lawrence, bringing up the rear. These three, though sympathetic enough, hardly exchanged a word with one another.

"It is like a funeral procession," moaned the unhappy baronet to himself; "the chief mourners are behind, but I am the undertaker himself in charge of the body."

CHAPTER XXV.

SQUIRE AND PARSON.

The squire had not accompanied the rest of the party home from church, and if he had done so it is probable that he would not have raised its standard of cheerfulness. His thoughts, while his friend in the pulpit had discoursed upon heavenly matters—as well as could be expected from a sermon that cost him but ninepence; for he bought them by the dozen—had been grave enough, though of the world worldly. Had he been a penitent, moved by the eloquence of the preacher to confess his sins, he could not have been in greater haste to see him: and when the sermon was concluded his pastor found him waiting in the vestry.

"'Pon my life!" exclaimed the astonished divine, not yet divested of his gown (for the

surplice was not agreeable to Miss Jane)—"This really won't do, Bob, it's not decent."

"Decent or not, it's necessary," was the cool rejoinder. "There's Salesby waiting for you in the churchyard, and what I have to say to you is not for *his* ears. Let us go out by the back way."

The back way was the chancel door, which, as a rule, Mr. Grueby did not use for egress, but though by a longer path it offered a private way to the vicarage, and the two men now took advantage of it. Mr. Grueby's dwelling, though small, was of good exterior, and in other hands might have been made as pleasant as it was picturesque; but both inside and out it had an appearance of neglect almost as great as that of Mr. Salesby. Thanks to a former incumbent, there were still some flowers in its garden, and creepers hung over its porch and casements, hiding with their lavish growth the evidences of decay. They darkened the low-ceilinged parlour into which the vicar led the way, and until the eyes got accustomed to the gloom, concealed there too the signs of poverty and neglect. The room was barely furnished, and the closed windows

preserved an atmosphere of stale tobacco from any contamination with the outer air.

"Your room stinks like a pot-house," exclaimed the squire, though he had been there many a time before without complaining of it; "why don't you let some air into it?"

"The window sticks a bit," replied the other —"There, now you've done it."

The visitor had seized the offending frame, and pushing it vehemently, had opened the window, but by the unusual method of putting his hand through it. For the moment it seemed that the vicar and the squire had exchanged callings, and that it was the latter's duty to read the Commination Service.

"I'll ring for a sponge and some water," observed the host apologetically.

"—— your sponge," replied the guest, winding his handkerchief about his hand, which was bleeding freely; "let us hear your news and be hanged to you."

"It's no use your putting yourself in a passion," answered Mr. Grueby doggedly. "I'm not to blame that you lost your money, and I've done the best for you I could, though bad's the best."

"I suppose so; it is not likely that a fellow that could send me such a fool's telegram as you did could make a bargain with a baby. Well, what *is* the bargain?"

Neither the words nor the tones of the speaker could be called conciliatory; but they produced no increase of irritation in his companion. The recollection of what was incumbent upon him as a divine, and upon a Sunday, too, perhaps caused him to exercise a moral restraint, or perhaps he was secretly well content that that unfortunate affair of the telegram had been got over, not indeed quite smoothly, but with comparative ease.

"Well," he said, "Burnes and Jessop will give you till Monday week to settle all in full."

"Will they indeed?" was the grim rejoinder. "They will be so good as to take £5,000 of mine a week after date, and charge me no interest for it neither. Why, it's quixotic."

"I don't know about that," continued Mr. Grueby indifferently, like a man who is no judge of the sentimental emotions; "but that, they said, was their last word, and if the money was not paid by 12 o'clock they'd post you."

The squire brought his hand down upon the table with an oath, and unfortunately it was the wounded hand.

"You had *better* let me send for a sponge," murmured the vicar, when the storm had died away.

"And Lazarus, what has Lazarus to say?"

"Oh, Lazarus—I always call him Dives, you know, which makes him wild—Lazarus will see you through it, upon good security, of course, if the money is paid him in six months, at 20 per cent."

"Why, that's £500! The cormorant!"

"Begad, it's a thousand! I've got the terms down in my pocket-book. He says he knows nothing about per cent. *per annum*."

In a single sentence, and that a very short one, the squire consigned the whole Hebrew race to everlasting perdition.

"By all means," said the vicar approvingly, "but that won't pay the money, you know."

Considering his intimate personal relations with the squire, Mr. Grueby's manner was scarcely sympathetic. The fact is, "he was in a hole," as he expressed it himself, and under these

circumstances it is not unpleasant to some people to have a companion, or, what is better, to see a friend in a still deeper hole. The satisfaction, however, such as it was, was short-lived.

"As to the money," observed Mr. Robert indifferently, "it so happens that there will be no trouble about it. It will probably be sent off by to-night's post; but I shall not forget the manner in which Burnes and Jessop have behaved to me. They shall have a bit of my mind with the cheque."

It was perhaps because that very respectable firm of bookmakers was known to Mr. Grueby that this menace produced but little effect upon him: he justly concluded that the cheque would make up to them for any expression of irritation that might accompany it; his mind was monopolised by the information that there was to be a cheque.

"So the governor will come down with it, will he? Well, upon my life it's very handsome of him, and a thing I should never have expected. So the storm's over, is it? Well, I should never have guessed it to look at you."

"It will be over to-night, I hope."

"Oh, I see; matters are not quite settled yet. Now look here, Bob, in my little way I've been hit as hard as you with Ganymede. Just make it guineas instead of pounds—it cannot make any difference to the old gentleman—and help me out of *my* difficulty with the odd shillings. I've always been your friend, you know, and kept a close tongue; and if you will, upon my life, there's nothing—nothing—that I won't do for you."

The squire took his chin in his unwounded hand and stroked it, as his manner was when engaged in thought. It would indeed be as easy for him—or as difficult—to raise the guineas as the pounds, and the additional sense of obligation did not weigh with him a feather. Circumstances might arise—though he hoped they would not do so—that would make the vicar's help of consequence to him.

"I'll do it," he said, after a pause. "If the governor does not shell out, Lazarus shall make it guineas."

"Upon my life you're a deuced good fellow!" exclaimed the vicar, in a tone in which surprise, it must be admitted, mingled with satisfaction;

"and, by-the-bye, how's your wife? I hope she has ceased to give you cause for anxiety?"

"Never you mind my wife," was the unexpected rejoinder, delivered with such vehemence as to be almost ferocity; "and don't you go meddling with the governor, as you call him, or mixing yourself up with any of my family affairs; mind that."

The vicar looked aghast, as well he might, for never, surely, had amiable inquiry been received in such a hostile spirit. However, he had the promise of a loan, which made amends for much amiss in the way of tone or manner.

"I am the last person to meddle," he said humbly, "and only wish to be of service to you. And—why, squire, you're dripping with blood!"

Mr. Robert, who had been standing up throughout the interview, here dropped into a chair, as though the last word had been a bullet.

"Blood! Whose blood?" he asked in tremulous tones.

"Why, your own, of course; your hand is bleeding like a pig. Do let me send for a sponge."

"Brandy, brandy, you fool; I'm faint," murmured the squire.

This restorative was fortunately at hand; indeed, the vicar kept a bottle of it in the cupboard of the bookcase which contained his theological library. And the sponge and water were sent for at last, and Mr. Grueby showed not a little intrepidity as well as skill in removing the broken glass from the squire's hand under a very heavy fire of imprecations. He had not expected him to be a good patient, but it did amaze this good Samaritan that the other should have been so affected by the sight of blood. "One would have thought," he said to himself, when the operation had been successfully performed and the squire had left him, "that he had been a better plucked one."

In this the vicar did not do the squire justice. Robert Stratton had plenty of brute courage; if it be true that a bully is always a coward—which at least one great student of human nature has taken leave to doubt—he was an exception to that rule. But though far from humane, he was human; and a certain thought which he had of late harboured in his mind, as a

half-hearted host harbours a thief, "you may stay if you will, but mind, I know nothing of you," had suddenly presented itself before him in its very ugliest form and unmanned him. Even the "Fighting Fifth" was subject to panic.

When Mr. Robert had said that that little matter (of lending him £5,000) between himself and his father was "not settled," he had, to a certain extent, spoken the truth; for a thing can scarcely be said to be quite settled concerning which not one word has yet been spoken. Nor, indeed, so far as the ex-Commissioner was concerned, was it likely to be. The squire knew his father's character very well, but the knowledge was not reciprocated. It would have astonished the old man exceedingly to learn that his only son—whose advice, if it did not lean to virtue's side, was always for prudence—was at heart a gambler. The gentleman of "the City" who risks his tens of thousands upon the Exchange, but holds up his hands with pious horror at the man who bets "a fiver" on a rubber of whist, is known to all of us; but Robert Stratton was of the opposite, and much rarer type; stocks and

shares had no charms for him; he especially distrusted those "underground swindles," as he called them, mines; but he was devoted to the racecourse.

Thanks to the progress of science and civilisation, the turf is a profession that anyone can now follow without attending a horse race; you have only to "touch the wires," as the classic poet expresses it, and the bookmaker thrills responsive to the magic call. With the firm of Burnes and Jessop the squire had done an extensive business for years, but never on so large a scale as on the present occasion. Their threat of "posting" him did not of itself disturb him; he could have borne a good deal of moral obloquy without wincing; but such a step would involve disclosure; he would stand before his father in his true colours—his racing colours—and that would spell ruin. If he could not raise the required sum within the week, he would have to apply to Lazarus. And, *here* again it was not the monstrous percentage that gentlemen charged which frightened him; though mean and grasping, he was not a miser like his sister Jane; if he had to pay £5,000 it might just as well be six

thousand; but where was he to get the securities to satisfy so exacting a creditor? There was only one quarter where he could look for it, and that at a terrible sacrifice; it was possible that his wife might help him, but at the utter loss of her respect, obedience, and confidence in him. She knew far less of his "goings on" than even his father did; from him he had concealed his character, or partly concealed it, but with her he had played the hypocrite from first to last.

The humiliation that confession would entail upon him was hateful to contemplate, and what was worse than all, he felt that he might humiliate himself in vain. In spite of her weak and affected ways, he knew that a vein of obstinacy ran through his wife's nature; so long as she thought herself to be the object of his devotion, and he retained her respect, all would go smoothly enough, but he feared, with reason, the effect which the revelation of his position—which involved that of his character—might have upon her. How would his "Popsy" like a demand from him for 5,000 guineas lost upon a horse-race? Her money was her own so long as she lived, though after her death, in default of issue,

it reverted to him, and she inherited along with her father's wealth, his love of it. If she did not understand its value as he had done, she knew what it had done for *her*, and had the modesty to perceive that she owed to her possession of it much of the court and respect that was paid to her. Her delicate fingers would probably hold their own with a tenacity not inferior to those of Mr. Lazarus.

However, the hopes of Mr. Robert Stratton were centred for the present neither in his father nor his wife, but in that honoured guest whom he believed to be panting for the distinction of becoming his nephew by marriage.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FAVOUR REFUSED.

Though it is the fashion to speak of a person who has a great reputation for sociability and agreeableness with admiration, it is really only a few who appreciate him; and it is their testimonial, and not his talents, which win the general applause; to folks in general one man as a companion is as good as another. This was strikingly exemplified in the case of Sir Charles Walden, and his entertainers at Hillsland Hall. They had derived from his society not one whit more pleasure than he had derived from theirs, and supposing (as they did) that the purpose for which they invited him had been accomplished, they were on the whole very glad to get rid of him. The last evening of his stay was passed, though neither to their satisfaction nor his own, in the company of his host and his son,

in the old gentleman's private room, to be admitted to which was an exceptional honour. Sir Charles felt that it would be bad manners indeed to decline the invitation, and especially in favour of the society of "that slip of a boy," as his grandfather in a moment of condescending recognition had called Lawrence. Moreover, it was his object to benefit the young fellow as much as he could, and if this could be accomplished at the expense of his grudging and unnatural relative, it had an additional attraction for him. As he had a shrewd suspicion that the boy would never return home again, to suffer from his adversary, he altered his rôle, which had been hitherto to ignore him, and spoke with praise of his character and literary promise.

The two men listened in silence: Mr. Robert with marked attention, and the ex-Commissioner with incredulous astonishment.

"I am glad you have discovered something *in* the lad, Sir Charles, which has escaped the notice of his pastors and masters," he replied, with a wave of his hookah. "I have had some little experience in literature myself. In my youth I distinguished myself as a *précis* writer, and as an

administrator, upon a rather extensive scale. My reports were considered (if I may be allowed to repeat the opinion entertained of them by the Government) models. Perhaps some of the talent may have descended."

"Perhaps," said Sir Charles thoughtfully; "though Lawrence's gift is not precisely of the same character."

The ex-Commissioner blew through his tube (as an elephant trumpets) in his cordial approval of this view, which hardly, however, went far enough. It was as though a friend had observed to Mr. William Wordsworth with reference to some work as to drainage, that it did not run on the same lines as the "Excursion."

"I was wondering," pursued the baronet with gentle suavity, "if the lad should really show any practical talent with his pen, whether you could be persuaded to let him follow that line of life. What is proposed for him at Singapore seems not very well suited to him."

At these words a yellow tooth, like a tiger's fang in miniature, emerged from the ex-Commissioner's lips and fastened upon the lower one. It was a storm signal that Mr. Robert well

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understood, and the warning glance he threw at his father did not escape Sir Charles's notice. The host was not unmoved by it, and exchanged at once what would certainly have been a denunciatory tone for a didactic one.

"When we are young, my dear Sir Charles, we seldom know what is good for us. There is no reason why this foolish boy should not cultivate his gift for letters, if he really has any, as well at Singapore as anywhere else. There are mails, I believe, at least once a fortnight. But as for his giving up the excellent appointment which my influence has procured him there, and taking to a precarious and not very respectable calling, in which too he would be an expense to his family," and here he turned to his son, like one who is certain of having found an argument which would ensure an advocate, "I don't think that either Robert, who has hitherto had the management of the boy, or myself could consent to that."

"Let us rather say," said Mr. Robert quietly, "that the subject will at least require a little consideration. Your suggestion has come upon us, Sir Charles, as a surprise; had it originated

in any other quarter, I should certainly have met it with a negative; but considering your great knowledge of the world, and also the compliment you pay us, in the interest thus manifested in our young relation, it would be discourteous to so dispose of the matter."

The baronet smiled and bowed. He quite understood that Mr. Robert had said "no" as distinctly as his father had, though in a more roundabout fashion. What puzzled him was why he should have taken the trouble to go round. He had expected to find the more direct as well as the stronger opposition from the squire, and not from his host, with whose obstinacy of character he was less acquainted.

"It is quite true, Sir Charles," resumed the old gentleman blandly, "that you can, as my son suggests, lay claim to a far greater knowledge of the world than most men; but it is the world of England rather than that of her dependencies. Now, of those I have, perhaps, a larger knowledge. Its opportunities for a young fellow such as" (here he hesitated, and Mr. Robert had to prompt him)—"to be sure, Lawrence; my memory is not, alas, what it used to be—its opportunities,

I say, are great and numerous, and let us hope he will take advantage of them. You see here, in my humble person" (the pride that swelled him, as he so described himself, was marvellous to witness), "an example of what can be effected in those regions by one who went thither without wealth or interest to assist him. I was always ready to lay my hand to anything; nothing came amiss to me; as the poet says, the lyre, the pen, the sword."

If Sir Charles's reflections could have been conveyed in speech, he would have said: "You remind me most of the liar: as to the sword, I believe you have never drawn one, but only the long bow (and perhaps a bill), and your pension:" but none of these sentiments could be gathered from his face, which expressed nothing but admiration and credulity.

"No, Sir Charles," concluded the ex-Commissioner, "I am afraid we must still say Singapore for my grandson."

It was clear enough from his manner that there was nothing more to be said on that point by anyone else. The baronet was not disappointed, for he had expected no other result,

but he was exceedingly displeased. He was not accustomed to ask a favour (for that was what he had done in this case, as the others well understood), and be refused; it did not at all disturb him that he had asked it upon false pretences, trusting to the view they entertained of his intentions towards Ruth. He had had such intentions, as we know; it was not his fault but hers that they had come to nothing; and he had felt no scruple in taking advantage of the error for Lawrence's benefit. But for its existence indeed, his interfering in such a matter as the young fellow's future would have been little short of an impertinence; a personal interest in the lad, however strong, would hardly have been a justification for it, but a personal connection with him in the future excused it. And now, though this pompous old egotist imagined that he had secured him for his grand-daughter, he had declined to oblige him in what, by comparison, was so small a matter.

Sir Charles's pride (of which he had a good deal, and much more than he would have confessed to) was hurt; and his dislike of those by whom the wound had been inflicted was intensified by it.

Though the ex-Commissioner had no idea of retracing his steps, he perceived, by his guest's silence, that he had gone too far; and the glances of disapprobation his son cast at him heightened his discomfort. That he entirely agreed with the determination he had expressed he was, of course, aware; but that afforded him no satisfaction. Robert evidently feared that he had given the baronet serious offence, and what was worse, he himself felt that it was so. It was a monstrous thing, of course, that a man in his position could not do what he pleased with his own, without being taken to task for it by an impudent fellow; but when the fellow is a baronet with thirty thousand a year, and one wants him for a grandson, his impudence is rather to be regretted than resented. The ex-Commissioner, indeed, was pale with rage and fear, and wore such a haggard look under his skull cap that Sir Charles afterwards described himself—to one who appreciated his humour—as never having felt "so near to Death" in his life.

Conversation among the three gentlemen languished, and it was felt to be a great relief by at least two of them when the guest rose to

depart upon the transparent plea that his departure the next morning had to be an early one.

Mr. Robert insisted on accompanying him to his room in spite of protest, and indeed his offer was by no means one of compliment or dictated by the duties of hospitality; nor did it surprise the object of that courtesy, who thought it likely enough the other wanted just to smooth matters, and rather enjoyed the reflection that he would utterly fail in doing so.

"I feel, my dear Sir Charles," said Mr. Robert, so soon as they were alone together, "that I owe you an apology for my father's somewhat curt behaviour to you this evening."

"Not at all," returned the other. "On the contrary, I feel justly reproved for meddling in a domestic matter with which I have no sort of concern."

"Pray do not say that," replied the squire, with genuine earnestness ("I do believe that obstinate old fool has driven him off the hook," was his private reflection). "It is a most deplorable circumstance, but the fact is that your young friend Lawrence" (and it was a proof of

hate, indeed, that even at such a moment he could not bring himself to say "my nephew") "is rather a sore subject with my father."

"Then don't let's talk about it," said Sir Charles, smiling coldly, and holding out a very stiff hand of farewell.

"One moment," said Mr. Robert, closing the open door at which they stood, and putting himself inside instead of outside of it; "I should like to have a few words with you, if you will allow me."

"By all means; sit down and take a cigar," said Sir Charles. His tone was studiously indifferent; but he was curious to know what the man had to say to him. That he wanted something was pretty certain, though not so certain as that he wouldn't get it: though he hated his society, the chance of an opportunity of playing this tyrannical bully, as an angler plays a trout, was gratifying to him. The knowledge that he was trading upon his niece's chances, greatly increased his disgust for him. An appeal *ad misericordiam* was not indeed what he anticipated, but if such a thing was contemplated, the petitioner, could he have looked into the other's

heart, might have saved his breath. On the other hand, could Sir Charles have looked into the squire's heart, and beheld the grim work that was going on in it, it is probable—though not for the squire's sake—that he would have been of a more pliant mind.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A LITTLE FAVOUR.

"With regard to the lad in whom you have been so good as to interest yourself," said Mr. Robert, with his shifty eyes upon the carpet, and a certain doggedness of manner, as of one compelled to speak upon a subject disagreeable to him, "I must, notwithstanding your protest, just say one word, in justice to my father. He has had some cause for displeasure—or, rather, let me say for disappointment—in the boy, which may excuse an apparent harshness of manner when speaking of Lawrence. He has done his best—or what seemed to be so—for him, with not very satisfactory results; and he has exerted his influence for him abroad, in hopes that he may succeed better than in England. This will entail a considerable expense in outfit——"

"Not if he has the same sort of outfit that he has at home," interposed Sir Charles drily.

"Well, really, if you mean clothes, and so on, these little matters have been hitherto left to his Aunt Jane."

"Who naturally knows nothing about them," put in the other sharply. "That is so far an excuse for her. But Lawrence is no longer a boy to be left in leading strings. You, Mr. Stratton, who have been a young man yourself, should have understood how humiliating must be such a position. Even a less sensitive nature than that of your nephew would have resented it. Take your own, for instance. How would *you* have liked at his age to find yourself without pocket money or a suit of decent clothes? Of course, I have no right——"

"Nay, you have every right," murmured the squire, in a voice that he vainly endeavoured to render conciliatory. It was like the growl of a dog who retreats under the table because the time for biting is not opportune.

"Well, at all events, since you have forced the subject upon me, I will speak plainly. The lad is starved, as it were, in a land of plenty.

There is money at Hillsland for everybody but himself, and there is no opportunity missed of making him feel that he is a dependent."

"I will see that he has pocket money, and a proper wardrobe. Indeed, I have made such arrangements as were possible as regards the latter already. I had represented to my sister that since you had honoured him by an invitation to Hurlby it would be only fitting——"

"Oh, pray do not bring me into the matter, Mr. Stratton," exclaimed the baronet warmly; "it does not mend matters to tell me that if your nephew were not coming to Hurlby he would remain in rags. The state of his wardrobe is nothing to me; but to be so treated must be a bitter mortification to any young man, and you know it."

There was cause for quarrel, and plenty of it, in the baronet's tone as well as in his words; he could not resist the opportunity of hinting, not very obscurely, to the squire, the opinion he had formed of him; but curiously enough Mr. Robert, never much influenced by "opinion," was not altogether displeased at the course matters had taken. He had persuaded himself

that Sir Charles was not angry upon Lawrence's account, but on his own; and that he resented the lad's "rags" because they reflected upon the connection that he himself was about to make with him through marriage with his cousin. Indeed, it was the fact that the squire had spoken to Aunt Jane of the propriety of Lawrence's being a little better dressed with a view to his proposed visit to "the castle," only Aunt Jane had replied "No: if the marriage came off, of course the boy must have a wedding garment, but if it didn't, it would in the meantime be an unnecessary expenditure." Mr. Robert made a mem. in his mind that an ample provision should now be made in this matter; a resolve that cost him the less struggle inasmuch as the money would not come out of his own pocket; but he was also prepared to pay something, and indeed a good deal, to put his guest in good humour. The big fish, it seemed, was landed after all. Still, the present conversation was neither a good omen, nor a favourable introduction to the matter the squire had in his mind.

"I hope," he said, "Lawrence will show himself grateful for your kindness to him, Sir Charles."

"The obligation, so far as his visit to Hurlby is concerned, I consider to be quite on the other side," returned the other. "He is a most agreeable companion."

"And I dare say you find living all alone at the castle a little *triste*."

This was in Mr. Robert's opinion quite a Machiavellian remark; he thought it might even "draw" his companion to admit as much, and hint that that drawback of loneliness was about to be remedied in a very gratifying manner. But it did nothing of the kind. The other smoked on in silence.

"There is a private matter I wish to speak to you about, Sir Charles," said the squire, desperately, and taking his courage in both hands.

"A private matter!" Sir Charles raised his eyebrows. "Really!" His tone was incurious, even indifferent.

"Yes; I have got a little favour to ask of you. With most people it would be a great favour, but in your case, I venture to think that, though of some magnitude, it will cause you no serious inconvenience. I want you, for a few

months only, to be so good as to lend me £5,000."

"Really!" said the baronet again, in exactly the same tone. "That is a large sum."

"It would of course, as I have said, seem a large sum to most people."

"It seems a large sum to *me*," said the baronet.

"Well, of course, in a way it does; and if the loan was not merely a temporary one, I should hesitate to apply for it even to you. It would, however, just now, be of immense service, and I have immediate need of it."

"The Derby?" suggested Sir Charles.

"Why, yes; I had the best information about Ganymede—it seemed a moral, but somehow it did not come off."

"Things do go that way on the turf occasionally; let us hope you will have better luck next time."

"Well, no; I have done with it. What has happened will be a lesson to me. Never will I bet again."

"In that case the misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise," said the baronet philoso-

phically, and flicking at his cigar-ash which was a very long one.

"Perhaps—but in the meantime—the disguise is so perfect that the blessing has the appearance of a disaster. I must raise the money somehow, and at once."

"And from what I gathered the other night of your father's sentiments, he would not, I suppose, be inclined to assist you?"

"He would see me—well, at all events he would not do it. That's certain. Nothing but the urgency of the case would have compelled me to apply to you for assistance. It distresses me to do so very much. To borrow money of one's friend, one's guest, is deplorable, still you will make allowance for my painful position."

"This sum is a debt of honour, I conclude, which you have incurred without the means of discharging it. If you had won you would have pulled off a very large stake."

"That's just it. I felt I was dealing with a man of the world, who would understand things." Sir Charles's satire had flown over his head; he imagined that an excuse had been made for him. "May I hope that you will lend me the money?"

"You may hope, of course," said the other smiling; "'hope springs eternal in the human breast,' as Lawrence would say—the lad is full of quotation; but at present I can promise you nothing. When I get home I will ask my secretary, who keeps my banking book for me. I have generally a pretty good balance, I believe. If I can oblige you, you will hear from me by to-morrow's post. And now I am afraid I must say *au revoir*, as my night will be a short one."

He held out his hand, which the other seized and squeezed with effusion. It was like wringing a dry towel. Still the squire had some hope. He had not at least received that point-blank refusal which had been quite on the cards. Sir Charles had the reputation of keeping a very large balance at his bankers. He had asked for no security, which indeed was fortunate, since insistence on that point would have been fatal. And yet Mr. Robert was far from comfortable in his mind about the money. He had certainly not found his friend so "accommodating" as he had expected. If he could have looked into the other's heart, or even into his room now that the door was between them, he would have felt

still less satisfied at the result of their interview. Directly he was alone, Sir Charles had thrown himself upon the sofa and burst out laughing. He was not in such a very great hurry to go to bed after all, it seemed, for he sat up smoking cigar after cigar, sometimes with a face grave enough, but every now and then the recollection of Mr. Robert's conciliatory manners—when applying for a loan—occurred to him, and it always evoked his mirth.

"He is like a snob in evening dress," he muttered to himself; "ten times worse than in his ordinary stripes and checks." And he made up his mind that the squire might have as many stripes as fortune—or Justice—might please to send him, but not one cheque from *him*.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FAREWELL.

In the morning neither the ex-Commissioner nor his son bade farewell to their guest. The former, indeed, rarely left his couch till midday, and the latter sent word that close attendance on his wife, whose malady had assumed a serious form, would, he regretted to say, prevent him leaving her apartment. Perhaps he wisely thought that the less he and his hoped-for creditor saw of one another, the better chance he had of obtaining his loan; or perhaps he felt that the spectacle of his nephew sitting in the baronet's carriage as his invited guest, and full of reminiscences of his uncle, would be too much for his temper. If he did not get the money, he was fully resolved that Master Lawrence, when he returned to Hillsland, should smart for it. He hated the lad for his little puff of

prosperity more than he had ever done while he had him under his heel, and to say truth he hated, though in a less degree, his benefactor also, notwithstanding that his hopes were centred in him.

Aunt Jerry, of course, was in her bed, much more seriously amiss than Mrs. Robert, though no such fuss was made about it; so that the breakfast party was limited to the three other ladies, the baronet, and Lawrence.

Miss Jane was very gracious; it was important to leave a good impression upon their departing guest, and her face was wreathed in genuine smiles, for she was exceedingly glad to get rid of him. His presence had been a restraint upon her in many ways; it had obliged her to curb her temper, and especially to extend a certain tolerance towards Lawrence, the necessity for which she resented. Nevertheless, even on this occasion she could not help taking a parting shot at him.

"I hope," she said, "*you boy*, that you will behave yourself properly at Hurlby, and not give cause to Sir Charles to repent of his good-nature."

This was said at the breakfast table in the

presence of them all, including Mrs. Merridew, who flushed, poor woman, to her forehead, but said nothing. Lawrence, too, went on with his egg in contemptuous silence.

"I don't think Lawrence and I are likely to quarrel, Miss Stratton," observed Sir Charles drily. "One can hardly call him a spoilt boy."

The adjective was equal to a folio of satire, and knocked Miss Jane "out of time." She glanced at the baronet in what was, to say the least of it, a very inhospitable manner, and remained speechless for the rest of the meal. But "when that boy comes back," she said to herself, just as her brother had done, "I will let him know what spoiling means," by which she meant (metaphorically) to imply that she would spoil the rod and not spare the child.

It was the first time that any observation had been made in that house upon the young fellow's treatment, and Mrs. Merridew snatched from it a fearful joy, which she did not dare exhibit. Ruth, however, thanked the baronet with her beautiful eyes, and when the two women found themselves alone with him afterwards they both expressed their gratitude.

"It will do no good," sighed Mrs. Merridew, "but it was very noble of you to say what you did about my poor boy."

"It did *me* good, at all events," said Ruth, with flashing eyes, "to hear you. Oh, would that I were a man, that I could tell them all what I think of them."

"You are much better as you are, believe me," answered Sir Charles gently. "Moreover," he added gaily, "it seems, from your aunt's example, that one does not require to be of the sterner sex to say exactly what one thinks of other people." Then he went on to say that he would take great care of Lawrence (which they didn't doubt), and a number of other friendly things, which to those who have no friends are better than rubies. To Mrs. Merridew, in whom the design in progress for Lawrence's future was looked upon with natural apprehension, he confined himself to these generalities, but in his leave-taking with Ruth he was confidential enough. He had indeed (as has been said) been within a very little of falling in love with her, but that was over now; and though his *amour propre* had been slightly wounded in the matter,

he felt not a spark of indignation against her. He not only admired, but, what was much more unusual with him, respected the girl. Strange to say, even her love for her cousin was a factor in his own regard for him, and in a vague sort of way he wished it a successful issue. That it was the best thing that could happen to Lawrence he well perceived, though, thanks to the young fellow's blindness, no less than to the material obstacles in the way of their union, it was not at all likely to happen.

"Lawrence of course will write to you, my dear Miss Ruth, and tell you how our plot goes on. It is a good plot."

"He will write to his mother, at all events," said Ruth, with a little sigh. "We shall be interested about it, of course."

"No doubt," said Sir Charles, perhaps with more significance than he intended, for the words brought a quick flush to her face. "And now and then I hope you will deign to think of me."

"I shall always think of you, Sir Charles, with gratitude and respect."

"In that case your kindness will be entirely

undeserved," was the unexpected reply. "If I have won respect from one like you, it must have been under false pretences. No, dear Miss Ruth, the most I hope for is that when you hear me spoken ill of, as must needs happen, you will say to yourself: 'There were some grains of good—or, at all events, of tenderness—in the man nevertheless.'"

"I shall say that and more to your detractors, and not only to myself," she answered, with spirit. "I am not always a coward as I was this morning."

"No, you are not a coward. You have a noble nature," he answered, with her hand in his. "I trust you may find someone some day who can not only appreciate it, which even *I* can do, but who may be more worthy of it. To Mrs. Merridew just now, for a reason that you will understand, I said *au revoir*, but to you I say good-bye."

In a moment he was gone like one who fears to stay; but Ruth never forgot his last word or his last look. There are moments when, for the most jaundiced eye, there is a glimpse of Heaven; and while the man of the world was bidding the

girl adieu, all sorts of possibilities of good flashed upon his mind with the speed—and, alas, the brevity—of lightning.

In the hall, where Mrs. Merridew was giving a tearful farewell to her boy, he was himself again. "You are taking from me, though I trust for his good," said the lady, "my only treasure."

"That is the one scruple I feel," answered the baronet, in significant allusion to their little conspiracy. "But he was not happy here, and you would rather be made unhappy by his absence than by seeing him unhappy."

"That is what I am trying to think," she answered, smiling through her tears.

"Upon my life," said Sir Charles to Lawrence, as the carriage rolled away. "I should like to have taken your mother and cousin with us to Hurlby, and left the rest of your belongings to stew in their own juice."

"I beg you will not abuse my belongings, Sir Charles," returned the young fellow gravely, "if, at least, they include my excellent uncle."

"Oh, Uncle Robert has been giving you the smooth side of his tongue for once, has

he?" returned the baronet, with twinkling eyes.

"Yes; it is nothing less than a miracle. He came into my room just now as I was packing up—I thought to murder me; he looked like it—and gave me *this*. It is a cheque from my grandfather for £50 to buy what he called a wardrobe; he meant, I suppose, the clothes to put in it. I could scarcely believe my eyes or my ears."

"Very good—and disinterested—of your uncle," observed Sir Charles drily.

"So he said. He also bade me remember the fact when speaking of him to you. He said he should surely know how I spoke of him, so that it behoved me to be very careful. One has heard of gilding the pill, but to accompany the gift with a menace, is the converse proceeding."

"That is very true, my lad, but you have got his £50. I said they had not spoilt *you*, but, by Jove, you have spoilt the Egyptians, which, as Mr. Pecksniff says, is very soothing."

"On the other hand, when I am gone," sighed Lawrence, "and don't come back again, I fear my 'ingratitude' will be visited upon my

poor mother. Oh, how I wish I could make a home for her—and for dear Ruth too—where we could all live together in peace."

"Your ambition is growing, Lorry. First you wanted to make your own living; then 'to make a home' for the young lady at 'The Corner,' and now you desire a quartette."

"Pray don't laugh at me, Sir Charles."

"I am far from laughing, my dear boy; the matter is serious because you are so unreasonable. The very best you can hope for from your pen for a long time to come is to keep the wolf from your own door. As to your mother, that is different; it is possible that with what little she may have of her own, you may at no very distant date be able to keep house together. But to hamper yourself with an engagement——"

"I have not done that," put in the young fellow bitterly.

"I am glad to hear you say so," pursued the other drily; "it would have been madness."

"I should, nevertheless, have been a madman if I could," answered Lawrence gravely.

"Miss Kitty then, I gather, was sane."

"She shrank, not from me, for I know she loves me dearly, but from my poor prospects. I do not blame her. She has had too cruel an experience of poverty herself; but if I ever make my way in the world—oh, sir, if I could win that woman, I would love her as wife was never loved!"

"That resolve is in 'Locksley Hall,' my lad; you remember how the affair came off."

"Yes; but even if Kitty behaved as 'Cousin Amy' did, I should not be bitter against her."

"Quite right; moreover, the bard, when his judgment was matured, wrote a poem on the same subject, you know, approving of the young person's behaviour to him."

It was hardly a question on which a young man was likely to agree with an old one; but Lawrence was far from feeling annoyed with his patron for thus pursuing it. It was only another proof of the personal interest his companion took in him that he should lay such stress on a matter in which he could have no sort of concern.

It was almost the only topic, however, on which they had hitherto conversed in which

they were not in accord, and the discussion, which here closed, left an unwonted silence behind it. Sir Charles was wrapped in his own thoughts and his eternal, or rather eternally renewed cigar. Lawrence had probably even more subjects of reflection, though more easy to guess. Kitty, his mother, Ruth, the home—hateful but for their presence—which, as he devoutly hoped, he had left for ever, and the palace of which he had often heard, in which he was about to find himself so unexpected a guest; London, that "promised land" to which all men—and boys—of letters look forward with such delightful expectation, and the future which literature might have to offer him. Sunk in these dreams he noticed neither the flight of time nor the smooth passage of the wheels through space till his companion gently said, "There's Hurlby!"

It was still far away, but its vast proportions had begun to dominate the landscape. "A castle, set on a hill," or, rather, on the side of one, backed by great woods, and belted by a river. In size even Hillsland Hall was a cottage compared with it, while in beauty of architecture

it was as far superior to it as it was in age. It seemed to Lawrence, as he looked at it, as though he had been only awakened from one dream to fall into another. It was not so much a view as a picture, drawn by some imaginative artist to illustrate a poem. Tower on tower rose like "cloud on cloud," and from the topmost, whence unseen eyes were doubtless watching their approach, there presently shot out a banner like a tongue of flame.

"The castle's welcome to its master," exclaimed the young fellow.

"Let us say rather to its guest," replied the other smiling.

It was perhaps an exaggeration of courtesy, but it became the speaker. Even Sir Charles Walden's detractors—and he had many—were compelled to admit that "he had a very pretty way with him."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT HURLBY.

There were a good many things in Hurlby Castle which excited, as well they might, the admiration of the county, but what most evoked its astonishment was its wealth of books. A library, of course (like its contents), was something that no gentleman's mansion should be without, but there is a medium in all things, and his neighbours rather resented this excessive profusion of literature. They even attributed to it, to some extent (though it must be allowed there were other reasons), his unneighbourly seclusion. It rendered him independent of their society. They could not understand that it gave him no pleasure.

"I dare say," he said to Lawrence, "that while you are here I can get some people who are not very particular (I mean as regards

myself) to come and meet you, but I really think we shall be more comfortable alone. The day before I went to Hillsland I met our squire, who (when away from his wife) is perfectly affable to me. 'Well, Sir Charles,' he said, with much cheerful energy, 'so you are lowering your fences.' It was not an interesting observation, was it? Of course I knew that I was lowering my fences. If he had told me that *he* was lowering my fences, he would at least (though I should not have cared for it) have conveyed some information to me. You shall meet the squire, if you like."

But Lawrence did not care to meet the squire, and Sir Charles and his guest passed the time alone together. With the latter it went very quickly. The castle was full of everything in which the Hall was deficient: of pictures, and statues, and books. The whole life was new to him, the hushed and stately attendants, and the manner in which they seemed to anticipate his wants; the splendour of the plate, the richness of the banquets, the perfection of the wines; above all the feeling that he was the centre of attention who was wont to be utterly neglected

and ignored. It is no wonder that he felt at times like Christopher Sly in the play. That there were chambers in this Bluebeard's castle into which he was not invited, by no means decreased his sense of satisfaction; the semi-seclusion of his host seemed not only natural enough, but was welcome to him. While it left him leisure to do exactly what he liked, it never trenched upon the duties of hospitality. He saw a great deal of his host, and the more he saw—though he was conscious that he only saw what he was meant to see, that most of his character was a blank to him—the more he liked him.

In his conversation the baronet was always frank; nor did his guest speculate as to whether he might not have been designedly so, in order to encourage frankness; in this respect Lawrence certainly did not require encouragement. He said exactly what he thought, not because it chanced, as it generally did, to coincide with the ideas of the other, but because, notwithstanding his years of slavery, it was natural to him to be free spoken. It was this, no doubt, no less than the fact that what he said was almost always

worth hearing, that made his talk attractive to his companion. It is only a few people that dare to be natural, and what seems paradoxical, but is nevertheless true, the most daring conversationalists are often the least natural of all. There is an affectation of originality that is no more like it than prudery is like modesty. But Lawrence Merridew, though by no means modest, was original. His mouth spoke literally out of the abundance of the heart. His simplicity—though it was only skin deep and was certain to be shortlived—was very refreshing to the man of the world who had bidden adieu to it himself long before his young friend was born. They talked of "fate, freewill, foreknowledge absolute," as though they had been contemporaries. Sir Charles's views upon these subjects were very different from those of Mr. Percy; but carried even less conviction with them to his auditor. They were cynical rather than sceptical, and youth, when natural and wholesome, revolts against cynicism. On the other hand, Sir Charles made no attempt to make a proselyte of the lad, and though satirical, was never contemptuous. Upon the whole Lawrence enjoyed his com-

panion's talk when in the semi-serious vein, more than in any other; no doubt it flattered his self-love to meet the other on such grounds, on equal terms; and imagined, reasonably enough, that the being permitted to do so was a proof of familiarity and friendship.

Years afterwards this visit to Hurlby became, even more than it now seemed, a thing apart in his life; it was still a splendid dream, but not without a certain touch of nightmare. Even while it held him in thrall he felt that there was something unreal about it, and did not desire its long continuance. Considering his age, Lawrence was by no means devoted to pleasure, or careless of the future while pleasure lasted. His experience of life had been too bitter for such forgetfulness. He longed to feel his feet, and fight his way, at all events, out of Hillsland. The idea of returning thither was abhorrent to him. It would have been even more so if he could have looked over Sir Charles's shoulder and read the note, which a few days after that gentleman reached home, he indited to Mr. Robert Stratton.

"Dear Sir,—Upon consulting my secretary I find that the balance at my banker's will not permit of my

obliging you in the manner you suggested; nor do I feel inclined to change my investments for that purpose."

Whether the secretary was ever consulted in the matter is doubtful, though there *was* a secretary, one Mr. Harbord, a very discreet person of middle age, who lived in much seclusion in his own apartments, and even when he came out of them appeared to be under a vow of silence. He moved without noise, and dressed so "quietly" that the term "my mute," by which his employer spoke of him, might have had a mere professional application. He was closeted for an hour or so with the baronet every morning, and emerged from those interviews with the face of a sphinx. To smile seemed actually painful to him, as though his unelastic lips had no margin for the operation. He was perfectly polite to Lawrence, and showed not a spark of jealousy (as he well might have done) at the intimacy that young man enjoyed with his patron, and which he himself was far from sharing. He seemed to be always engaged in correspondence. A few years later he might have been likened to one of those automatic machines which, when

you put a penny into the slot, return you a manuscript of some kind.

"What do you think of my private secretary?" inquired Sir Charles of Lorry, with one of his queer smiles.

"Well, it is hard to say; he is such a *very* private secretary," replied the young fellow, an answer that delighted his host immensely.

Not even the praise of his epigrams, however (though it was dear to him), nor the being lapped in luxury and the unwonted experience of being made much of for his own sake, could close the young man's eyes to the necessity for exertion. He longed to feel his feet on the step of the ladder that should lead, if not to fame or fortune, at least to independence of some kind. Under no circumstances, perhaps, as has been said, would he have returned to Hillsland, but a letter presently came to him from Ruth that convinced him that return was well-nigh impossible, that he had burnt his boats.

"For some reason or another," she wrote, "Uncle Robert is more set against you than ever." He read this out to his host, who after a burst of laughter grew suddenly serious.

"The fact is, my dear Lorry," he said, "it is *I* who am the reason. You must not speak of it, because a certain silence should always be observed in such matters. I should have respected your uncle's confidence (though nothing was said between us about confidence) but for this new proof of his swinish nature: he has tried to borrow money of me and failed."

"Borrow money of *you?* Impossible!" exclaimed Lawrence in astonishment.

"Oh, quite impossible," assented the other drily. "But I am afraid I led him to believe that there was just an off chance of my becoming his creditor. Hence these latest execrations against his nephew. I got that £50 for you by it; the sprat he threw out to catch a salmon. It was good interest for the money, however, considering that it was never lent. You may think it was not quite a nice business——"

"I think it was an excellent business," put in Lorry delightedly.

Sir Charles began pacing up and down the room, a common practice with him when not on good terms with himself.

"Yes, with a wild beast of that kind, delicate

scruples are out of the question. The sum was £5,000, I may tell you, no less. When the crash comes with this relative of yours, as it is bound to do, this may be a good card to play with grandpapa. 'Your son, who has told you such lies of *me*,' you might say, 'has concealed one or two things about himself: that he lost £5,000 on the last Derby, for instance.'"

This was great news to Lawrence, of course, but it in no way altered his determination to get to work; indeed, it quickened it. With his knowledge of Uncle Robert it was easy to guess that his ill-humour would not wait to vent itself upon him on his return, but would be felt by others. His poor mother, from whom he had also a letter, full of love and fears, would feel it. To do him justice, the desire of doing something for himself was even less urgent with him than that of placing her out of reach of contempt and ill-treatment. A home, however humble, with her son would, he well knew, be to her far preferable to her present state of gilded misery.

"I am deeply sensible of your kindness to me," he said to his host, "and of the seeming ingratitude that prevents my being perfectly

happy under your hospitable roof, but I feel that I ought to be up and doing. You were good enough to say, 'Why not work here—where I have "a golden pen and heaped up flowers against which to lean"—as well as in London?' but I find I cannot do it."

If he had expected opposition he had been mistaken.

"This is Liberty Hall, my lad," returned the baronet smiling. "When I was your age, and a guest at a country house, none of its attractions equalled the sense that I could leave it without being pressed to stay. If you are half as much bored with Hurlby as I am——"

"But, indeed, that is not the cause," put in Lawrence plaintively.

"I know it is not. You have what seems to you a much better reason, though a less one would have sufficed for me, and left no sting behind it. You shall go to-morrow, if you please. Well, that's settled. Now I have something to say to you. It is partly through me that Hillsland has been made intolerable to you. It is I who have burnt your boats for you by declining to be your uncle's banker, so the least I can do

in reparation is to become *your* banker. Let me lend you ——"

"Pray, pray, do not go on," said Lawrence with flushed face.

"Well, if it distresses you, I will say no more, but I must say you have less good sense than I had credited you with."

"It is not that, Sir Charles, nor that your generosity fails to reach my very heart," replied the young fellow, deeply moved. "But a loan to anyone in my position might be—very probably would be—a gift. I will take—as indeed I have taken—all other kindnesses from your hand, but not this one."

Sir Charles regarded him with raised eyebrows and an amused smile.

"Curious!" he soliloquised aloud, with an amused smile. "These delicate scruples, my dear Lorry, do honour to your heart, of course, but upon my life they are no compliment to your head. However, I must needs respect them. Let us say no more about it: only if you do want money, don't go for it where your uncle will probably go—to the Jews: come to me."

"I have, thanks to you, £60 in hand,"

said Lawrence quietly. "Even after paying for my modest outfit, I shall have plenty to live upon till I earn something by my pen."

"You would not have a shilling at the end of a week in London if you were left to your own devices," returned the other confidently. "That catastrophe at least I can, however, guard against. I have written to Latham all about you, and he will not be surprised to see Dick Whittington (as he has facetiously termed you) at any moment. He has two maiden sisters, who will provide you with respectable lodgings in their own vicinity—Nelson Crescent, Bloomsbury—and look after your purse and your morals. It will not be a brilliant beginning of a literary career, but it will be a safe one, as I promised your mother it should be."

This touched the young fellow profoundly; he knew how little such forethought and attention to details were in accordance with the other's character, and he was filled with gratitude for the solicitude he had thus exhibited on his behalf.

On the morrow, therefore, Lawrence left for London, not unregretted by the household. He

had the art (as it is called, though it is a gift of nature) of attracting his fellow-creatures to him. The housemaids wept; the valet who had been put in charge of him pronounced him (as he pocketed his half-sovereign) to be "a good sort" of young gentleman, though he could never understand what had become of his clothes. Even Mr. Harbord stretched his lips into a smile as he said "good-bye" to him.

Sir Charles saw him to the carriage door.

"I shall never forget your kindness," said the lad in a broken voice.

"You will indeed," returned the other gaily but confidently. "Think of me at my best and expect my worst. That is all I ask of you, my dear Lorry."

It was a strange farewell, but not an uncharacteristic one, though the time had not yet arrived for the other to comprehend its full significance.

CHAPTER XXX.

NELSON CRESCENT.

Nelson Crescent, Bloomsbury, is not a fashionable locality; smart people, who live in the little streets off Park Lane, and put their six feet of footman into a cupboard they call a servant's bedroom, turn up their noses at the mention of such an address; but though not fashionable, the houses in Nelson Crescent are roomy. The dinner guest who passes between the fire and the table runs no risk *there* of being burnt to a cinder; air and space are not at a premium; and the garden on which the front windows look is quite an extensive piece of ground, with real trees in it. It is said, of course, that nobody who is anybody would dream of living in Nelson Crescent, but that was not Mr. Leopold Latham's view, who did live there, and thought a good deal of himself. He had a magazine of his own,

The Areopagus, and also an income, which does not always follow in such cases. Indeed, it was whispered in Paternoster Row that if he had not had the magazine his income would have been larger.

His two sisters, Margaret and Mary, ladies respectively of fifty and forty years of age, lived with him and helped to diminish it, a misfortune he bore with much equanimity. They were not ornamental, though Miss Margaret thought Miss Mary to be so, "not in her first youth," she admitted; but what is comeliness dependent upon that circumstance? The mere beauty of the Devil (as the French happily term it). There was a majestic grandeur about Miss Mary, who was five feet eleven in her—well, without her shoes—which she pronounced to be queenlike. Miss Margaret herself was even taller, but had not her sister's grace of movement, and was also rather severely marked with the smallpox, which detracts from feminine comeliness. Her brother Leopold had suffered from the same malady; but in a man that matters nothing. He had a good deal of humour—of the sort called "very dry"—and spoke of his countenance as being "beautifully

carved." He was less than of medium height, and had that stoop of the shoulders which belongs to the student, and also to those who in their youth have "lived every day of their lives;" and it was whispered that Mr. Latham had earned it both ways. He had distinguished himself at the University not only in the schools, but had combined the rôles of "fast" and "reading man," and it was at college that he had fallen in with Sir Charles Walden. They had then had many things in common, and though now it would have been difficult to find two college contemporaries more utterly different in pursuits and position, their friendship remained unbroken. Mr. Latham understood the baronet thoroughly; he was the only link with his old life that remained to him; and with all his faults he had a sincere regard for him. Moreover, he was under obligations to him, which though in a material sense had been repaid, his nature was too generous to forget.

He received Lawrence with an old-fashioned hospitality that set him at once at his ease. The young fellow had had no expectations of so kindly a welcome, nor of finding his new friend so

handsomely housed. He knew nothing of fashion or its effects on locality, and was surprised at the size of Mr. Latham's residence, and the air of comfort which surrounded him. When at the little Cornish station he had exchanged Sir Charles's barouche for a third-class railway carriage, he had imagined he was bidding good-bye for years, and very likely for ever, to luxury of all kinds. After Hurlby Castle almost every London house would have seemed "cabined, cribbed, confined," but he had taken it for granted that a man like Mr. Latham, living (as he understood) by literature, would have had a dwelling of far more modest dimensions than he found it to be. The back room on the ground floor, into which he was ushered by the neatest of maid-servants, was by no means a mere study, but well deserved, both from its size and contents, the name of library.

"And how is my friend Walden?" inquired his host, who, with all his geniality of manner, was regarding him, he did not fail to note, with a certain curiosity; "or rather I should say 'our friend,' for he seems to have a strong liking for you."

"He has, at all events, treated me with the greatest kindness," said Lawrence modestly.

"That's well; nor am I at all surprised at it," added the other graciously. "It is rather late for talking over matters just now; indeed close on dinner-time."

"I am sorry to have intruded upon you at such an hour; but Sir Charles led me to hope that you would be so good as to recommend me a lodging."

"Things must be new and strange enough to you, without the addition, the first evening, of a London landlady. You must dine and sleep here to-night."

"Indeed, Mr. Latham," hesitated the young fellow, "I had not dreamed of inconveniencing you to that extent."

"It is no inconvenience to me, and my sisters will like it. It will be a great pleasure to them; they do not have a young gentleman from the country to take care of every day. If you don't mind being a little unwell so as to want brown paper and vinegar, or a mustard poultice, it will be a great treat to my sister Margaret. In the meantime I will show you

your room. The restrictions as to evening dress are, as the advertisements say, 'suspended' in this house; we can only give you five minutes, after which you will find us in the drawing-room."

These details were dwelt upon with some insistence, and Lawrence subsequently discovered they were important in Mr. Latham's eyes. After embracing several religions and pursuing various objects of study and pleasure with much eagerness, he had become content with the observance of punctuality at meals and the disregard of the custom of dressing for them. Similar rules of life await the termination of a good many enthusiasms.

In the drawing-room Miss Latham received her guest with an almost maternal cordiality, introduced him to her sister as to some angelic being of whose acquaintance she was not without hope he might be worthy, and watched the effect with smiling confidence.

Nor did it appear to be misplaced, for, won by so much unexpected kindness, Lawrence's gratitude shone in every feature, and was set down at once to respectful admiration. He

thought Miss Mary very nice and very tall. While he made himself agreeable to the ladies, Mr. Latham looked on amused, with his hands in his pockets. There was a curious likeness in his manner of taking things (though with it all similitude ceased) to that of Sir Charles—a certain philosophical manner that is cousin german to cynicism.

At dinner-time Miss Margaret asked many questions about Hurlby Castle; her brother had been a guest there, but had not sufficiently dwelt upon its magnificence, or its owner's mode of life. In her heart of hearts, though she had never seen him, she felt that the baronet was just the man for Mary; past the heyday of youth, but not the less fitted on that account to appreciate the charms of maturity and a well-balanced mind. Though it seemed he had withdrawn from his position in the giddy world of fashion, was he really resolved never to come to town? Was it true that he had utterly abjured female society? The pleasure Mr. Latham exhibited while his young friend was thus under the harrow was really discreditable; if he did not know much about Sir Charles in his later

days, he knew Lawrence knew still less, and his efforts to satisfy Miss Margaret's curiosity tickled him excessively. When, however, she asked to what accomplishment the owner of Hurlby was most inclined, he took pity on the lad, and replied for him, "Cigar smoking;" at which Miss Margaret bridled up and closed her cross-examination.

When the ladies had withdrawn, Mr. Latham, to Lawrence's great delight, began to talk of business—that is to say, of Lawrence himself.

"I can't do very much for you myself," he said; "my periodical is not a channel of publication very suited to your style of writing; but you may give me the refusal of your contributions, and what is not good enough for *The Areopagus*—I mean, of course, not suitable for it," he added hastily—"I will endeavour to place elsewhere. You must understand, however, that everything will eventually depend upon yourself; literature is one of the few callings in which that is absolutely the case. I don't say that it depends upon merit, because there are many examples to the contrary, but it owes nothing to favouritism after the first start. You will have

a good 'send-off,' a strong push from the shore, after which you must trust to the wave and the wind."

"I am fortunate indeed in having so kind a friend to help me," said Lawrence warmly.

"Yes, Walden is a very powerful ally."

"I was thinking just then of *you*, sir."

"Of me? Oh, I merely assist the impulse that is given by the master-hand. That we shall be good friends I have no doubt, but in this matter I am but the echo of your friend. I have not known him interest himself in any one for years as he has done in your case. It is most important to one situated as you are to have a banker behind one—an ally with the sinews of war."

"But indeed, sir, I am not proposing to be under pecuniary obligations to Sir Charles Walden," said Lawrence earnestly. "He was so good as to offer something of the kind, but I declined it."

Mr. Latham elevated his eyebrows and regarded his young friend with whimsical curiosity. "Really! And yet, as I understand, you contemplate increasing your responsibilities."

"Not, of course, for the present," returned the young fellow deprecatingly. "I look forward in time to be in a position to ask my mother to live with me."

"And there is a cousin also, is there not?"

"I have a Cousin Ruth, to whom she is very much attached," said Lawrence, with a flush, "if——"

"I see," said Mr. Latham smiling, "you are of a sanguine nature, Mr. Merridew; and I am afraid that in cultivating literature you will find it a stiffish soil. However, what can be done shall be done. Your poems have great merit, but unhappily it is only a very few of our songsters that live by song. They get plenty of sugar, but very little seed. I have looked over what you sent me from Hurlby." Here he rose and produced some MSS. from a drawer. "The poems will all want revision, and some of them are sad stuff; but one or two of the things may be made, I think, between us, marketable. No, no, you must thank Sir Charles, not me. You are much too young to run alone, my lad, and that's the truth, though you are as clever as

paint. There is a poem here called 'Silence' that struck my fancy :—

'Gone art thou, Beautiful, but whither gone?
As ye are human men, answer give none,'

it begins; don't you think there is a little redundancy? Are not most men 'human men'? However, that's a trifle.

'Never one drank those eyes but who grew faint,
Never one touched those lips but suffered taint;
Better far deaf were the doomed ears that hung
On thy words, thou charmer, with serpent tongue.'

You were speaking of a man, of course, and not a woman, so I thought.

'Godless thyself, thou mad'st us think of Him
Who, dowered with grace and glory, face and limb,
Bade the heart's lightness in that soul uprise,
And the fine brain make eloquent those eyes;
And mercifully ordained that wheresoe'er
Prayerless thou wanderest, thou invokedst the prayer.
All have forgiven thee, fresh flowerets bloom,
Plucked by some injured hand, over thy tomb.'

and so on; that is distinctly good; and all, I suppose, like the German professor's camel, evoked out of your own imagination, eh?"

Mr. Latham, with a playful smile, waited for the reply.

"Well, yes, I suppose so," said Lawrence, smiling too.

"So I thought. Well, to-morrow we will go over all this together and winnow it a bit."

Upstairs they had a little music. Miss Mary sang some of Moore's Irish ballads with a charming simplicity, while Lawrence turned over the leaves; after which she retired earlier than the rest, like a tired child.

"Beautiful, is she not?" whispered Miss Margaret to Lawrence confidentially, while her brother read the *Quarterly* in his own chair.

"Very much so," he replied, scarcely knowing what she said from the extreme unexpectedness of the inquiry. He felt that he had fallen short of expectation.

"Your cousin, I conclude," she continued, "though I hear she too is very lovely, is of another style."

"Ruth is darker than your sister," he answered, "but there are many points of

resemblance between them." So there were; they both had eyes, nose, mouth, and a chin.

"That is very interesting, and will be a bond between you," observed Miss Margaret; "it will make our house more like home to you."

It did not seem worth while to put Miss Margaret right upon a matter on which she had apparently made up her mind; her exceeding kindness made any sort of contradiction difficult to her guest, and after all, what did it matter? Nevertheless, he was rather taken aback when after a long motherly talk concerning the lodging she had fixed for him and the arrangements for his comfort, Miss Margaret declared that it was an immense relief to her, as regarded his moral well-being, to learn from dear Leopold that he had "a virtuous attachment."

Well, he had—though it was only too likely in the case in question that virtue would be its own reward—and if Miss Margaret had made a mistake in the particular object of it, there was no need to undeceive her. It might be a humiliating confession, but he did not attempt to conceal from himself that what was pressing upon

him at present, and was likely to do so for years to come, was not the providing himself with a wife, but with the means of subsistence. Even the poet who sings of "bread and cheese and kisses" puts the bread and cheese first, presumably because he thought them of the first importance.

CHAPTER XXXI.

LETTERS FROM HOME.

The next morning Miss Margaret introduced her young friend to the apartments she had selected for him. They were clean and neat and reasonable in price, and the landlady, an honest widow, whom she had known for years, at once took a fancy to her new lodger.

Lawrence did not know at the time what obligations he was under in this matter to Miss Margaret. The "long unlovely street" looked melancholy enough; light and air and space, those blessings he had hitherto enjoyed without knowing it, seemed altogether wanting. The spectacle of the poor slavey, with her shoes down at heel, and her expression of hopelessness and exhaustion, depressed him. It was a wet morning, and Bloomsbury in tears is not an exhilarating object. However, when his books were

unpacked, his little room would look more habitable, he reflected, and at all events there would be nothing to distract him from his literary labours. There were thousands of young men in town far worse provided for the struggle for existence than Lawrence Merridew, but most of them had regular work to occupy them, however humble; it was the enforced idleness, when he should have done all that he could do—for our writing powers are limited—in which lay his danger. This is one of the strongest objections—though it is kept out of sight—to a young man's exercising a literary life; he has of necessity too much leisure, which generally means getting into mischief. From this Lawrence was preserved, not so much I venture to think, by that "virtuous attachment" of which Miss Margaret thought so highly, as by the hospitality of Nelson Crescent.

"When you have nothing better to do, you can drop in here," Mr. Latham had kindly said to him, and this proved a boon indeed. Though the editor was so careful to impress upon him that his benefactions were extended to him only at second-hand, that he was, as it were, but the almoner of Sir Charles, the fact was that Lawrence

had made a very favourable impression on him. After all is said of literary jealousies, there is no calling in which men are so ready to help one another as that of letters; though Mr. Latham smiled at Lawrence and his aspirations, he also smiled upon him. Like his friend Sir Charles, he particularly disliked trouble of any kind, yet he took a great deal of pains with the young fellow. Without it indeed his case would have been hopeless: he was too young a writer to be conscious of his own faults; like all clever lads he was often flippant where he had imagined he was witty, and though he never flattered himself he was sublime, was unaware that in his highest flights he generally only succeeded in making himself ridiculous.

Even when Mr. Latham had done his best for him in pointing out these errors, they would have been sufficiently numerous to have ensured the rejection of his contributions from much humbler periodicals than *The Areopagus* but for its editor's personal recommendation. Though Mr. Latham had made no great mark in the world of letters himself, he was known to have a shrewd eye for literary ability of all kinds, and he recognised in

Lawrence Merridew a young man of remarkable talent. The young fellow's observation in particular was very keen, and his very ignorance of life in London presented to him those salient points of which the more experienced eye soon loses sight. He did some sketches of street scenes and people that found considerable favour; but they appeared in comparatively obscure periodicals, and were poorly remunerated. By comparison with what he received from them the *honoraria* from *The Areopagus*, for occasional articles which Mr. Latham had nevertheless almost re-written, were gigantic. With his simple tastes, and desire for economy, and especially from the absence of temptation to spend money in pleasure, from which the open door in Nelson Crescent relieved him, Lawrence had no difficulty even from the first in making "both ends meet," and even in having a margin. His experience of the cultivation of literature upon a little oatmeal will doubtless, however, be one day narrated by himself—at all events, it is not with that matter that we have here to deal.

On the fourth day of his arrival in town, he received two letters from Hillsland with that

deep black edging which tells of "the shadow feared of man;" as the superscriptions were in the hands of his mother and Ruth, this, however, moved him but little. A man that has few friends, and knows those he has are safe, is no more affected by such tidings than a bachelor in lodgings is disturbed by the reports of house-breaking in his neighbourhood.

"It is poor Aunt Jerry," Lawrence said to himself, before he broke the seal, and he was right. "It must be a happy release to her." That the occurrence could have any effect upon his own interests never entered his mind; and there he was wrong. We can never say for certain of the conduct of any of our fellow-creatures that it matters nothing to us, a consideration which, if upon no higher ground, should influence our conduct towards them.

The demise of the lady in question, though he himself took it so philosophically, affected his correspondents exceedingly.

"Your poor Aunt Jerry has left us," wrote his mother, "for a better and a happier world. I grieve for her on my own account, though not, dear soul, on hers. I remember the time when

we were young children together, and looked forward to quite another lot in this life than that which has befallen us. It is almost as difficult to read our future here as hereafter." "How different all this is," thought Lawrence, "from what I should have expected of my dear mother!" He could not understand the effect of an experience which had never occurred to himself. "Her parting from dear Ruth was most touching. 'I think I must needs meet you again, my darling,' she said, 'if it is only to say how much I owe you.' And this again struck Lawrence as very strange and very unlike Aunt Jerry. "There are only two left here to mourn her, as you know. She is to be buried on Thursday; you will think of us, and of her, on that day, I know, dear Lorry."

He said to himself that he would try to think; but the matter really affected him very little. On the other hand he read again and again the loving words in which his mother replied to the letter he had written her from town; her congratulations upon the friends he had found in Nelson Crescent; her simple hopes for his success in literature; her prayer for his well-being.

"Be a good man, my dear," she wrote, little knowing who had said those pathetic words before her, "it is the only thing to comfort you when you come to lie on your death-bed." Last of all she wrote, "There is another trouble here, which (save with Ruth and me) overshadows the present calamity; Mrs. Robert is ill—really very ill, I fear—and your uncle is greatly disturbed about it." Lawrence's keen eye noticed that expressive term "disturbed," where "distressed" would have seemed so much more appropriate. It was indeed impossible to conceive of Mr. Robert Stratton as distressed. "Dear Ruth's attentions to poor Aunt Jerry were rather grudged, I fear, at last, but of course her duty lay there first. Mrs. Robert has taken a great fancy to have your cousin with her, so that you must not expect a long letter from her, but she tells me she is writing. Ruth never neglects anyone to whom she can give any comfort. She feels her aunt's death very much, I know, but hides her sorrow so as not to add to mine; and that warns me not to make *you* sad, my darling, with the story of our trouble. Only it is well for all of us, even the young and the strong, to be reminded of what sooner or later

awaits us all. You have described your position so graphically that I have no difficulty in picturing it; you think yourself alone, but you are not so; my thoughts and prayers are ever with you, my own boy."

The simplicity of his mother's words touched the lad even more than their tenderness. Here was nature indeed, the core of life, compared with which its externals, with which alone, as his conscience told him, he concerned himself, were insignificant. "What a selfish beast one feels," he murmured penitently.

Then he opened Ruth's letter.

"My dear Lorry,—Your mother will have told you of our loss. It is a sad blow to her, I fear, and has reduced her little world to very narrow limits. The state of Mrs. Robert's health is also giving us no little anxiety." Lawrence ran his eye mechanically down the letter to see if there was really no other allusion to Aunt Jerry's death, but there was none. The writer, he felt, understood him thoroughly. It was not from fear of making him sad that *she* was thus reticent, but from the knowledge that he had so little interest in the subject; he was

ashamed of himself that so it was, but it was so. And yet he knew that this tacit reproach was not intended to be such; Ruth loved the dead woman, and was naturally disinclined to write of her to one who had no share in that affection; but her chief motive, he knew, was to tell him what would interest him, and that only. This was evident in every line. "You would be amused (but for the sadness of the occasion) to see what an important personage I have become —as a sick nurse. Uncle Robert says he will give me a handsome certificate if I ever take up that line of business. It will be difficult for you to imagine this affability; but, indeed, he is much changed. We did him wrong, perhaps, in supposing him not to be genuinely attached to his 'Popsy,' though sometimes I cannot help thinking that he has also some other cause of trouble. He looks haggard and much older than when you left. You must not, however, flatter yourself that he is pining for you. He has never mentioned your name nor, what is more surprising, that of Sir Charles, with whom, no doubt, he concludes you are still residing. Grandpapa shuts himself up closer than ever;

Aunt Jane roams everywhere, save into one room. It is curious, though to do her justice she tendered her services, that Mrs. Robert does not at all encourage her visits; this seems to me a bad sign: she must be really ill to manifest so much genuineness of sentiment in opposition to so strong a will; her husband, however, insists on her wishes being carried out in every particular. Aunt Jane is by no means pleased at the preference thus unexpectedly shown me by the invalid, and the consideration it wins for me from Robert; but, as you may imagine, I have not sought this greatness and cannot help its being thrust upon me. I have not been in the village for many days, so have no news of any kind for you."

Lawrence's eyes lingered over that passage. Was it possible that Ruth suspected he was solicitous about local news? Of course he had not heard from Kitty, nor had he any expectation of doing so, but he would have liked to have had word of her well-being. Mr. Richard Salesby had probably spent or lost all the money he had won at the races by this time, and her short-lived prosperity had come to an end. That

circumstance would not make her more tolerant of poverty in the abstract, more inclined to favour his suit. Yet where *could* she look for competence, much more to the wealth to which she aspired? Much as she might despise "water and a crust," they were all that would be likely to be offered her, and it might be that when persuaded of this, she might be driven to accept such bread and milk as he would be able to share with her: the idea of this "starving out the garrison" and inducing it to surrender to him as a prisoner was indeed neither pleasant nor complimentary to himself; but as the image of lovely Kitty presented itself to his mind, he seemed to welcome it with rapture at any price. What a sunshine she would make in "that shady place" (as Nelson Street unquestionably was); what a palace to his eyes would those dingy lodgings become if beautified by her presence. (What dreams! yet who of us have not had them?)

"Uncle Robert, as I have said," continued Ruth's letter, "has not opened his lips about you, but Aunt Jane has just expressed her apprehensions to me that any prolonged expe-

rience of the luxuries of Hurlby Castle is likely to be 'deleterious to a young man who for many years will probably not have two sixpences to rub against one another.' The slight want of gracefulness in the remark must be forgiven her in consideration of the affectionate solicitude which prompted it. No, Lorry, you must not come back here. I am thankful beyond expression for the little gleam of prosperity which, as you tell us, is shining upon you: that the clouds are breaking ever so little is a good sign. I kiss my hand to Fortune who has so far been propitious to you. I bless, with my whole heart, the kind friends you have found in London. All these things seem to promise a better future for you; you know how we miss you, but I am not so selfish as to wish you back at Hillsland Hall. However spare may be your fare, it must needs be better than the grudged bread of dependence. You may say, perhaps, 'but that is *your* bread, my cousin;' well, it is so, but it is not quite so black as yours was; and then you are a man, Lorry, which makes a difference. I admire you for refusing even Sir Charles's help. No one should accept such aid save,

always, from those he loves and of his own kin."

Much of this was characteristic enough of the writer; it was also characteristic, he felt, that from a heart full of sorrow and sadness, she had thus spoken for his sake. He pitied Ruth's position, but was very ready to agree with her that to a woman a state of dependence was less intolerable than to a man. If he had known what she was suffering, and was about to suffer, he would have regarded the matter with less complacency.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RUTH AND KATE.

YOUNG gentlemen like Lawrence Merridew often come up to town as being the only place in which they can see "life." But life is on view elsewhere, and always, just as death is; and it was Ruth Stratton's lot to have a much more remarkable experience of it than her cousin, notwithstanding that he was in search of that very thing, as all young writers are, for "copy." We go to the play to see tragedy and melodrama, but when, as often happens, they come to us, their effect is much greater; happy for us when we are spectators only, and are not included in the *dramatis personæ*.

A few days after Aunt Jerry's burial Ruth took a walk by herself, which could with reason be called a constitutional; for weeks she had played the rôle of nurse, having without an

interval transferred her services from the death-bed of one relative to the sick-room of another. Mrs. Merridew had taken her place by the bed-side of Mrs. Robert; for that lady was still resolute in declining Miss Jane's services, and for the present her will was law; her husband upheld her every wish, and would have been pronounced, by anyone who was unacquainted with his character, a pattern of domestic life; indeed, he had always been a good husband, so far as behaviour went, though everyone but his wife believed his attentions were devoted to his "Popsy's" jointure, rather than to the treasures of her mind or her personal charms. There are many husbands to whom the money settled on their wives is a more lasting source of respect than beauty or even accomplishments; it does not deteriorate with time or use; and often blossoms in their very dust. But it really seemed that in this matter Mr. Robert's detractors (and they were many) had done him wrong.

He was most assiduous in his tendance of his wife, and anticipated her every wish, even though it might not be convenient with his own. Under

these circumstances it was not likely that he would spare other people whose services she required, and poor Ruth's energies—already weakened by her long attendance on Aunt Jerry—had been tried to the uttermost. A little air and exercise, and also the opportunity for reflection, she felt, were absolutely necessary to her further usefulness. Within doors, strange to say, she could not think; the atmosphere of the Hall, heavy with death and sickness, had no doubt something to do with this, but there was also a sense of oppression in it, independent of that, for which she could not account, which seemed to paralyse her mental faculties. Lawrence's absence from home was also a factor in it, and a much more important one than she would have acknowledged. His wit and brightness had illumined its dulness; his gentleness and affection had compensated for their absence in others where she had looked for them in vain, and had long ceased to look; it affected the spirits of the one relative remaining to her whom she loved, and made her a more depressing companion than ever. Lawrence might be "sorry for himself" alone in London, but at

least he had work to do which braced and stimulated him; Ruth had no such work, for though she nursed Mrs. Robert with perfect willingness, it could hardly be called a labour of love. This comparison in his favour, however, never entered Ruth's mind; she thought only of his loneliness, and the reflection added another weight to her depression.

It was no wonder, therefore, that she sought that tonic prescription of Dr. Nature's—the fresh air of the hill-top. That breezy moorland had been her favourite roaming place of old. She had raced upon it with Lawrence when they were children. She had sat with him on the fragrant heather for hours, and listened to his scraps of poems and imaginative talk, in later years, when the lark sang high above them not more joyously. All that was over now and for ever. She had lost him, and her inmost heart told her how much she had lost. He had enclosed a short letter to her in a longer one to his mother; that of itself was a fatal sign. A lover does not enclose his letters; and though full of tenderness and affection, there had, to her sensitive eye, been something wanting in it.

Aunt Jerry had been right; in his heart he preferred another. He had doubtless written to Kate Salesby in a very different fashion. "And why should he not?" she inquired of herself indignantly. "He had not played her false; he had never pretended to—to——" She dashed the tears from her cheeks as if they shamed them. If love was denied her, duty was still left. It should be her mission to comfort dear Aunt Merridew; to do what she could for her now and always, though that would be little indeed; to nurse Mrs. Robert and bring her back to life the shortest way.

To those who do right and their best there is, it is said, always content. What copy-book consolation! For what content had poor Mrs. Merridew found in her blameless life, and that tender heart which had been wrung so mercilessly. The prosperous, so far as her experience went, were the hard and cruel. These thoughts of a soul in conflict followed and fought one another within her, as wave follows and fights with wave. She gave them rein, feeling that somehow the end would be peace, but in the meantime it seemed to her that her fate was

hard, that scarcely in all the world could a girl be found in sadder case than she. Instead of deriving strength from the wholesome air, or pleasure from the lovely scene beneath her, the associations of the place filled her with sorrow and regret. The pine wood, with its solemn dirges and hearse-like plumes, seemed more consonant with her feelings than the breezy and sunlit moor, and to the pine wood she made her way. As she neared it a sound fell upon her ears, which, though melancholy and woful enough, was not the solemn sough of the trees, but the wail of human misery. Some little child, perhaps, as had happened before, had strayed too far from her home and been lost—or seemed to be lost—in the dark wood. All thoughts of her own troubles vanished from Ruth's heart at this evidence of another's woe. She pushed on, at first almost in darkness, so strong was the contrast between the sunlight she had left and the shade of the trees, and it was not without some shock to her nerves that from a sandy hollow close at hand there suddenly bounded up like a stag disturbed in its covert, Kate Salesby. Her sobs had ceased, and she

was regarding the intruder with flashing eyes, but the large tears were still standing on her cheeks, and her face had that haggard look which comes only after years of ill-requited toil, or one hour of human misery. Each had taken the other by surprise, but while Ruth was unable for a moment or two to identify her neighbour (who indeed had little likeness to the proud and self-conscious girl she had hitherto known), Kate recognised her at once.

"Who told you I was here?" she inquired passionately. "What right have you, you of all the women in the world, to dog my footsteps? Is it not enough——" Here she paused, recalled to herself less by reflection than by the other's distressful looks, and, with her hand upon her heaving breast, awaited Ruth's reply.

"Indeed, Kate, I had no intention of intruding upon you," she answered sweetly; "though if I had known you were in trouble I should have offered, as I do now, what help I could. I am not so happy myself that I can afford to despise the sympathy of others, or as I would rather say, if you will let me, of a friend."

"*You* not happy? Why should you not be happy?" returned Kate scornfully. "To be sure you have lost a relative"—pointing to her mourning dress—"but what is death? It cannot be so vile and sordid, or else so shameful, as life itself. If I had not been a coward I should have been dead by now, myself."

She spoke with a vehemence of passion that fell little short of the anguish of despair. "What a hypocrite you are, and how ignorant of what life is, to speak of your unhappiness in the same breath with mine. Look at me and then at yourself."

It was characteristic that the speaker should have made personal appearance the test of such a matter, but indeed there were materials for contrast in it. Although perfectly simple, Ruth's mourning attire was neat to faultlessness; her face, though pale and worn, was calm and composed in its expression, and showed no evidences of violent grief. Kate, on the other hand, might have stood for "Niobe, all tears," save for the resentment which, in spite of them, glared in her eyes; her dress was disordered where she had plucked at it in some access of

passion, and covered with sand, though none of this interfered with her beauty, which indeed was heightened rather than otherwise by her intense excitement.

"It is a poor comfort to decide, Kate, as to which of us is the more miserable," said Ruth gently. "But I do assure you, if you think me happy and prosperous, or without the most serious anxieties both for the present and the future, you are mistaken. I have lost—well, no matter what I have lost, but just now it seems almost everything worth having. Your own case can scarcely be harder than that, and yet I pity you from the bottom of my heart, and if I can comfort you——" she put out her hand to place it on the girl's shoulder caressingly, but the other drew back.

"Don't touch me," she said in quick, hoarse tones, "or you will repent it. I am not fit to touch."

For the moment Ruth thought the speaker referred to her soiled garments, but her face revealed a deeper meaning. It expressed shame dogged and resentful, but still shame, as well as wretchedness and rage.

"There is no woman who should say that to another," said Ruth gravely. "If you think that such a one as I, at all events, fear to touch you, however ill you may think of yourself, you are mistaken," and with a sudden impulse she stepped forward, and before the other could prevent it, kissed her on the cheek.

"You would not have done that if you had known," cried the other; "but you have a good heart."

"And so, I believe, have you, Kate."

"No; there is nothing good about me; there was at one time, perhaps, but that is over. All is over. Let us talk of something else. Do you ever write to Lawrence—I need not have asked; I read it in your face; you blush, but yours is not the blush of shame. You do well to love him, for he is worthy of your love."

"Indeed, Kate, you are mistaken," stammered Ruth; "he is my cousin, you know, and we have been brought up together——"

"Just so. It could not therefore have been otherwise. When you write to him, wish him good-bye for me. There is nothing between us, as he knows, for I have told him so; nothing at

all; but there is a reason why I cannot say farewell to him; yes, indeed there is a reason. He will never speak of me, and I trust he will never think of me again. I am dead to him, as I shall be dead to you, after to-day."

"Dead, Kate? What *do* you mean?"

"Do not ask. You will know to-morrow. Everybody will know then. I am not going to kill myself as you imagine; I have not the courage; I am a coward as well as everything else that one should be ashamed to be. Yet, I am grateful to you, Ruth Stratton, for your kind words and your sweet looks. I am glad to think —yes, I am trying to be glad to think that they will comfort him and make him happy. I could have done it myself, perhaps, if he had been rich and prosperous; though I am not sure even of that; he took interest in so many things of which I understand nothing, I was beneath him in so many ways; but to lighten his burdens, to share his poverty, that would have been impossible for me to do. I have seen too much of poverty. I want wealth; carriages, horses, dresses; never to have to think of what they cost. That is what makes one happy.

You may say that you did not find me so just now; but there are some things—even poor things—that one regrets to part with, just at first. To-morrow I shall be in Paradise."

"I have not the least idea, Kate, what you are talking about."

"I suppose not," she answered scornfully; "you are such a highly respectable family at the Hall; your stony-hearted old grandfather, and that hypocritical tyrant your uncle—" then with a sudden passionate wail—"Oh, forgive me, forgive me; I don't know what I am saying."

"I am sure you do not, dear Kate," answered Ruth earnestly: "I trust also you are not really thinking of taking any desperate step—I know not what, but one you will repent of—either to-morrow or any day, but if so confide in me, and though my advice may be valueless, it is something, you will find, to have a sympathiser."

"A sympathiser! You!" exclaimed the other, with a ghastly smile. "No, Ruth. All I ask of you—and I never thought to ask as much—is when hearing of what I am, to remember what I was, and not in pity (I want no

one's pity), but in charity to judge me. Farewell."

She was ten yards away before Ruth could put out her hand: she ran at speed through the fringe of wood, and then like a bird along the moor without casting one look behind her. To have pursued her would have been useless, for no girl in Hillsland had so fleet a foot.

What project Kate had in her head Ruth could not guess; but she was convinced that she was on the brink of some desperate act, which would have far-reaching consequences. Nothing, however, Ruth could say or do could hinder it; it struck her, indeed, that she ought to put Mr. Salesby on his guard, but his influence over his daughter was very small, and, moreover, for that day at least interference was out of the question, for the hour was past up to which she could reasonably expect to find that gentleman sober; he was "muzzy" in the morning; he was "elevated" in the afternoon; but at six o'clock—punctually—he was drunk.

Under no circumstances would Ruth have refused her assistance to one in such evidently unhappy case as Kate Salesby, but it might

have been impossible to give her sympathy; with no willing heart could she have helped on any engagement between Kate and her cousin; but it was now clear that no such engagement existed. This was news which could not be otherwise than welcome to her. A wife less suited to Lawrence than Kate could hardly be imagined; indeed she seemed herself to be conscious of her unfitness for that position; it had been a danger of the most serious kind, and one which had threatened his future more than all other opposing causes; and it was now removed. However toilsome might be his path, his steps would not be hampered by a life-long companion who had no sympathy with his efforts, and resented the poverty with which it was only too likely they would be attended. This was indeed a source of satisfaction. It was not of course flattering to Ruth's self-love that Kate had given up Lawrence, as it were, in her favour; in fact, the one thing that she could not forgive her was the imputation, which she was conscious of having combated but feebly, that she was in love with Lawrence herself. But in Kate's state of excitement and despair it was likely

enough she should have exaggerated everything, including her own relations with Lawrence; and from this idea it is not too much to say that Ruth derived the greatest satisfaction of all. In spite of the genuine pity she felt for the girl, the information that had been imparted to her made Ruth a happier woman; and though she would have befriended her in any case, the task seemed much more easy, since in doing so she would not be furthering any matrimonial scheme which had Lawrence Merridew for its object.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHAT RUTH OVERHEARD.

Every student of humanity, who is an honest fellow, confesses (to himself) that he sometimes makes mistakes; it is no wonder, therefore, that those who are not students are still more often mistaken in their superficial diagnosis of their fellow-creatures. Ruth had always taken what would have been called a charitable view of Mrs. Robert Stratton's character; that she was something of a hypochondriac was too obvious to be denied by anybody, given to magnify her ailments, and to arrogate to herself considerable privileges on the strength of them, but Ruth had never assented to the general verdict that she was selfish, affected, and spoilt. But in these days the girl felt no little remorse in having judged "the professional invalid" (as Lawrence used to call her) with even a moderate severity.

In real sickness, such as she was without doubt suffering from, she was a model of patience; perhaps it was a bad sign, for it not seldom happens that persons who exhibit great irritability when "indisposed" become amenable—and even amiable—when seriously ill. The only symptoms of her former character she had retained were those "likes and dislikes" in which she had always indulged herself; and even these were now limited to a very decided objection to Miss Jane. Considering their former familiarity this was curious, unless, indeed, it was a proof of the grave character of her disorder, since when we are very ill our instincts, warning us that we have now no time to spare in being deceived, seldom fail to draw us to the good and turn us from the worthless.

This theory, however, would to some minds have broken down in face of the fact that Mrs. Robert still clung to her husband. She had done so, however, when she had been well—or by comparison well—and no one could question his devotion under the present circumstances. As Ruth had written to Lawrence, Mr. Robert was a changed man, but in nothing so much as in the

way that he discharged the duties of a sick nurse. He had always petted his "Popsy," but that had cost him little trouble; he was now her slave. The doctor, who, though living some miles away, was in daily attendance, recommended "constant support," but the poor lady had no appetite and "turned against" the most excellent dainties. The only food she seemed to relish was what she had been used to as a child in Scotland, from whence she came, oatmeal porridge, and this only when prepared by her husband's hands. We know what Ruth thought of her uncle, yet it now touched her to mark the care with which he ministered to the sick woman's wants, the cheerful wisdom with which he combated the apprehensions she expressed about herself. There was an anxiety not only in his voice, but in his eye (which, as a channel of hypocrisy, is much less under our control), that could hardly be spurious; and whenever he parted from her—which was seldom, and only to take the air for health's sake—the promise that his absence would be cut short was given with the same tenderness with which it was received. Ruth had read of persons who, cold and even

cruel to the rest of their fellow-creatures, manifest great affection to their immediate belongings. In her uncle's case this was as limited as the love of a lioness for her cubs, but it certainly seemed to exist. He was really what his "Popsy" called him, "the best of husbands."

Ruth was thrown much more into his society, of course, than she had ever been before, and he puzzled her. It was not possible for her to forget what manner of man he really was, and the presentation of this smooth side of his character —the existence of which she had never suspected —to her observation awoke a certain interest in her. There were long days passed in the sleep of exhaustion by the patient, in which Ruth had little else to do than to take note of Uncle Robert. They were "Popsy's" only nurses, for such was her wish, and it was law.

"Whom do I need but you, dear Ruth, and dearest Robert?" she would say pitifully. "Could anyone make my porridge for me like him?"

He certainly took a good deal of pains with it, making it soft and palatable with Cornish cream, which the doctor had recommended. If

it was not very supporting it was better than nothing, which unhappily was the alternative; but it seemed to do her no good. Some days she was a little better than others, but on the whole she was gradually wasting away. Atrophy the country doctor called it, and very pleased he seemed to be to have found the right name for it. But what weakened her most of all was sickness. Even that native porridge created nausea. But, as has been said, there were intervals.

Curiously enough, when Mr. Robert was summoned away for two days from Hillsland, on business of his father's, and not a pleasant business in connection with a certain mining company, in which the old gentleman had got entangled, his "Popsy" rallied a little, and took her porridge with some approach to appetite; but after his return she grew more rapidly and distinctly worse. To Ruth it seemed a very mysterious ailment, and more than once she besought her uncle to call in another opinion; but he shook his head, "Popsy is opposed to it," he said; which was final. He could not or would not recognise her danger.

One lovely August evening, when the invalid

had had an unusually bad day, Ruth left her asleep in charge of Mrs. Merridew, and stole out in the garden for a little fresh air. It was no longer possible for her to leave her charge for even so long as would have permitted a walk into the village; the sick woman would be sure to inquire for her when she woke up, and to fret if she could not be summoned. Since her walk upon the moorland, Ruth had twice called at "The Corner," but on both occasions Kate had been too unwell to see her. She did not believe she was physically ill, but only indisposed for an interview. It was indeed quite probable that she regretted the impulse that had caused her to be so frank at their last meeting, and was even ashamed perhaps of the emotion she had exhibited. It was, at all events, satisfactory that the catastrophe at which she had hinted as being imminent had not taken place, and whatever rash step Kitty may have contemplated was postponed, or it might be hoped abandoned.

Ruth's anxiety upon Mrs. Robert's account had by no means caused her to lose sight of the difficulties, or even dangers, in which the girl

was placed, but it prevented her mind from dwelling upon them as it would otherwise have done. What with her invalid evidently on the road that led away from amendment, and Kitty in her grievous but unknown trouble, and Aunt Jerry in the churchyard, and Lorry absent and alone in London, Ruth had only too many things —and all of a depressing nature—to think about. And being a sensible girl, and feeling how necessary it was for the patient's sake not to "give way," she had taken a book with her in her evening walk.

It was the first she happened to lay her hand on in her little bookshelf, or if she had given herself time for choice, it would hardly have been "Uncle Silas;" a work of genius indeed, if ever there was one, but certainly not a story fitted to raise the spirits, or to prevent the imagination dwelling upon gloomy themes. Having once opened it, however, at random, the charm of the novel, notwithstanding that she was well acquainted with it, laid hold of her, and filled her with its "fearful joy." It was the chapter where Uncle Silas's unhappy niece discovers that the wicked French governess whom, as a child,

she has had such cause to hate and fear, is under the same roof with her.

Philosophy may be studied as we walk, but the drama—and especially the melodrama—of life, demands a certain amount of repose for its enjoyment; we must take a seat to witness it. Ruth stepped into the same pine-clad arbour in which Sir Charles and Lawrence had found Miss Jane immersed in theology, and the next minute was in another world. It is curious indeed how often the constant but judicious novel reader abolishes time and space in this way, and is transported, as on an enchanted carpet, among scenes and persons he will otherwise never know, but which, while the glamour lasts, are as familiar to him as those of his everyday life, from which he is thus far more separated than in the land of dreams. For in dreams our friends and relatives appear to us, though under grotesque circumstances. In dreams too, it may be noticed, by the way, that the personages of fiction never appear, not even to him who creates them.

Intent on her novel, Ruth suddenly hears Uncle Silas talking with his more dissipated but

less cold-blooded son, and what he says is quite unlooked for.

"I tell you that the guarantee is all right, and how I have obtained it is no business of yours."

"But when the six months come to an end, Stratton, how will you settle with the Jew?"

Then she knows that it is not Uncle Silas and his son she is listening to, but Uncle Robert and his friend and boon companion, the Reverend Arthur Grueby. The horror of the fact is somehow worse than the horror of the fiction. Ruth is paralysed with terror, not so much at her situation, which is that of an involuntary eavesdropper, nor even at what she overhears, but at the tone of the speakers. It is confidential, of course, but there is also a certain reticence in it, as though both men had much more on their minds than they contrived to express. How she comes to hear them is simple enough, though not to her. Her mind is far too disturbed and affrighted to suggest to her that they are merely standing under the shelter of the arbour out of the wind, because one has let his cigar go out, and is relighting it with a wax vesta. Finding

themselves so comfortable they stop for a minute, as smokers often do, before resuming their walk. What Ruth is saying to herself is that they will come to sit down in the arbour, and find her there spying upon them. Why she should have spying imputed to her, she does not know, but that it will be so, she is well convinced; indeed, since they continue their conversation, and she continues to listen to it—for she is speech bound—they will have a reasonable cause of complaint.

"Five thousand pounds, with the interest, is a big sum?" continues the vicar interrogatively.

"Unfortunately it will be only too easy to pay it, or five times as much long before the time you mention."

"Good heavens! Is your poor lady so ill as that?"

"I fear so; that at least is the doctor's opinion. I have been hoping against hope; but I can do so no longer."

"Tut, tut; what a sad business! Still it is the common fate."

There was an uncomfortable silence, then,

"I don't think these cigars are so good as the last you got me, Grueby."

"They are the same brand," and with that the speakers moved away.

Freed from one terror, Ruth was now overwhelmed by another; she felt sick and shocked. Only that very day had the doctor informed her that though Mrs. Robert was ill, there was no reason to apprehend a fatal issue; if the constant sickness should be cured, or even intermitted, strength would return to her; only that very day Uncle Robert had expressed to her the most sanguine views of their patient; so far from "hoping against hope" he had never hinted at any serious danger from first to last. Yet all along, or certainly for some time, it now appeared that he had foreseen that she would die; and he could speak of that catastrophe in the same breath with a criticism on a cigar. Moreover, and worse than all, his wife's death it seemed would release him from some grave pecuniary trouble.

These things, not in logical sequence, or one after another, but in one appalling aggregate, presented themselves in a moment to Ruth Stratton's mind. The little edifice of good

opinion which had been in course of erection within her during these latter days respecting her uncle fell to pieces like a house of cards. He was proved at once to be heartless and hypocritical. He might well, indeed, be so devoted to his "Popsy," since he knew that the inconvenience of so being would last for so short a time, and that he would be so well rewarded for his trouble; that he should have *that* contingency in his thoughts filled Ruth with a shadowy but possible fear which she felt it her duty to expel; we must be just and charitable even with the lowest of our fellow-creatures; the ties of blood, the law of nature herself, protested against the dark suspicion that had found entrance into her soul. And yet there it was; the dew on her brow, the trembling in her limbs, the sickness at her heart, announced it to be there. When she strove to analyse the reasons for its shameful presence, she came to the conclusion that it was mainly caused by the condition of mind in which it found her. She had been deep in "Uncle Silas," and his crime had transposed itself to her living uncle; such things only occurred in fiction; indeed,

Uncle Silas himself had shrunk from lifting his own hand against his helpless guest and kinswoman; whereas in this case—though the temptation, alas, was the same, and the hypocrisy, and the coldness of heart; "these cigars are not so good as those you got me last?"—the victim was the man's own wife, the woman he had sworn to cherish in sickness and in health—no, she would cast out the shocking thought, and pray to Heaven that her beating heart might never again entertain such a visitant. What were poverty and isolation and dependence compared with the misery of such a suspicion as this? So groundless, too; the monstrous offspring of a prejudice. She would have had reason indeed to be ashamed of herself, to ask pardon of high Heaven for having imputed such a crime in the case of any fellow-creature; but of so near a kinsman, it was worse—detestable. Thus she reasoned with herself, with contemptuous indignation at her own imaginings, and not in vain. Charity and common-sense presently overcame them. It was time that she should return to her patient, and in the performance of her duties to forget these

morbid fancies. On the threshold of the sick chamber she met Uncle Robert, with a cup in his hand; he looked anxious and troubled. "It is so unfortunate," he said, "that dearest Popsy has taken a distaste for porridge: she used to be so fond of it, and Shepstone (the doctor) so strongly recommends it? I do hope, Ruth, you will try to reason with her; see, she has not drunk half of it."

"I will do my best to persuade her to take it," said Ruth, and she held out her hand for the cup.

Uncle Robert hesitated. "It does not signify for to-night," he said, "I was speaking of the matter generally."

"Still, if it is good for her, why should she miss a meal?" said Ruth, taking the cup from his hand. There is nothing wrong with the porridge, I suppose?"

"Wrong?" he replied angrily. "Well, of course not. I have made it myself with cream and sugar as usual."

"She must have it while it's hot," returned Ruth quietly, and entered the room, closing the door behind her.

Another minute in her uncle's company was more than she could just then have borne. She had indeed been perfectly calm in her manner. It was his hand, and not hers, that had trembled as she took the cup from him; but the strain upon her nerves had been almost beyond endurance.

There was an ante-room, separated from the sick-room by a portière, and here she remained for a few seconds to recover herself. When she made her appearance by the bedside of the invalid she no longer held the cup in her hand.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BY THE SICK BED.

As Ruth approached the bed, Mrs. Merridew withdrew to make room for her, and pointing to the patient, who was apparently asleep, said softly—

"She is not so well to-night, I am sorry to say."

"I am dying," murmured Mrs. Robert faintly.

"Nay, I trust not that," answered Ruth, bending over her.

"Why should you wish me to live?" was the querulous reply. "I turn against everything, even against life itself."

It was characteristic enough that disinclination for her food should loom so largely in the sick woman's mind, and an hour ago Ruth would have thought little of it, but it had now a far greater significance for her.

"You could not take the porridge, my dear," she said, as though she was addressing a child, for that was the manner that suited "Popsy" best. "Perhaps it was badly made."

"Oh, no; dear Robert made it himself, and, of course, beautifully; but even that now makes me ill. I have been *so* sick."

Ruth herself felt sick, though from quite another cause. She would have given much to have been free to go to her own room and have a "good cry" before sitting down to think what was to be done; but for the present it behoved her, above all things, to be mistress of herself. She had a presentiment that ere she reached that sanctuary she would need all her strength for yet another ordeal, nor was she mistaken. While "Popsy" was still detailing her symptoms, which apparently had been of the same kind as usual, though somewhat more serious, Uncle Robert entered the room.

"Come, come, that's well," he said gently. "I see you have been persuaded by Ruth to take your porridge, though you would not listen to me."

"She has not taken it," interposed Ruth

quietly. "She thinks that it was that which made her ill."

"But it's gone," exclaimed Uncle Robert, in a tone in which, to her ear, astonishment seemed not unmixed with alarm; "the cup is in the ante-room, empty. Where *is* the porridge?"

"I threw it away," said Ruth indifferently. "It was hopeless to induce her to take it. Dr. Shepstone must recommend her something else."

"The doctor knows better than you do," he answered harshly. "We must consider the health of our dear patient, and not her fancies."

He took no pains to lower his voice, though he was standing close to the bed. It was the first time he had shown himself in opposition to his wife, and she resented it by silence. Her head was turned away from him, and she had closed her eyes.

"I had been in hopes to find you better, my darling," he returned softly. "I had just been telling Grueby before I came in to give you your porridge that I thought you had turned the corner. I had felt so much more cheerful about you, that I joined him in having a swim in the

lake, the first I have had since you were ill. It is late, and the water was cold."

"How this man lies!" was Ruth's reflection. Why did he talk like this? Was he speaking at random because his mind was occupied by quite another matter that might well monopolise it. At all events, he spoke in vain. His "Popsy" answered nothing. "I think our dear one is asleep," he murmured; "that is more likely to do her good than anything. Be sure you call me," he added, turning to the two ladies, "when she wakes."

He turned away, but, as Ruth thought, he delayed in the ante-room. She could hardly breathe for terror; it paralysed her even worse than it had done in the summer-house; her blood seemed to leave her heart and rush to her head. If he had returned, she felt that she must shriek out "Murderer!" But in a moment or two, which seemed hours, the outer door closed.

He was gone.

"Be so good as to stay for five minutes longer, Aunt Fanny," said Ruth; "I have forgotten to take off my outdoor shoes."

Fortunately she had forgotten to do so; for to invent an excuse for leaving the patient would have been impossible. Her mind was too full of terrible thoughts, too occupied with the immediate purpose she had in view, for any effort of imagination. In the ante-room upon the table stood the empty cup; was it fancy that caused her to conclude from its appearance that it had been wiped round as with a handkerchief, so that no vestige of the porridge remained in it. At all events, it now struck her for the first time that what remained of the patient's meal had always been thus cleared away; unless her uncle took the cup away with him. On a chair lay Ruth's hand-bag, in which she was accustomed to keep such work as she could employ herself upon, while watching by the sick bed. There was something in the bag now beside the work.

When she reached her room and had locked the door, she took it out. It was an empty marmalade pot that had been in the room, into which she had poured the remains of the porridge from the cup, and this she proceeded to carefully tie down with paper, as a housekeeper ties her jam.

When this was done, she placed it in a drawer and locked it, and then threw herself into a chair with a deep sigh. If she had expected tears to come to her relief she was mistaken, nor, indeed, did she seem to need them.

There was no time for lamentation now; she must think, and when she had taken thought must act upon it. If she was doing her uncle a wrong in suspecting him of this most heinous crime, it was a grievous wrong; but that had been already committed. She did suspect him. And what were scruples on that account compared with the necessity of preventing the accomplishment of his crime, if her suspicion was well founded. What had unconsciously hardened her heart against him and given her the courage to do what she had done, was his request that she should persuade his wife to take the porridge. He had not hesitated—supposing he was the wretch she believed him to be—to make her his instrument and confederate, and had placed in her own hands the cup, the contents of which were intended to shorten his wife's days. There was not an hour to be lost in putting a stop to this most treacherous and

unnatural design, but if there had been time to spare she would not have spared *him*. His punishment (should he be found to deserve it) would have been equally swift. But how should the proof be brought about? The doctor would, of course, have been the proper person in whom to confide her suspicions; but she had little confidence in the doctor. He would probably pronounce her suspicions incredible. He had a great respect for the county families, among whom he reckoned the tenants of the Hall, because he attended them, and Uncle Robert had gone out of his way to conciliate him. In his incredulity and weakness he might even reveal her accusation to her uncle himself. And to whom could she make it except to the doctor? Certainly not to Mr. Grueby, who, though he might be shocked and horrified at it, would, even if he believed it, decline to prosecute his friend. His advice would be to hush it up, which would probably only cause her uncle to put off the execution of his design to a more convenient season. For an instant Ruth even thought of Sir Charles, but apart from the extreme disagreeableness of consulting him on such a matter, he

was the last man to trouble himself with investigations.

Mrs. Robert had relations alive, a brother and a married sister. They ought, of course, to have been written to long ago, but her uncle had forbidden it, it would make dear "Popsy" nervous about herself. How could Ruth write to them, when he had declined to do so? And what help could they be, at present, even if she did. Then there flashed upon her mind, as though she had seen it written by some spirit hand upon the sky, "There is Mr. Percy." She knew him well, though of late she had seen little of him; he now seldom came to the Hall; but at one time, when Lawrence was his pupil, he had been a more frequent visitor, and had impressed her very favourably. Her cousin had always spoken of him in the highest terms. He was a man she could trust, and whose advice would be valuable. But he lived ten miles away, and what excuse could she frame for visiting him? Moreover, she was very unwilling to leave her patient alone and unprotected for so many hours. The post had gone, and upon the whole she decided to telegraph to Mr. Percy the

next morning. It would be impossible to state the reason of her summons, or make any allusion to her uncle, for the postmaster, like most other folk in Hillsland, was under the squire's thumb. It was a case in which some duplicity was permissible. "Pray come at once," was the form which, after some consideration, her message took. "I wish to consult you in connection with Lawrence. Urgent."

The matter had certainly some connection with Lawrence, as with herself; if her uncle should get to know of the telegram, she would have to tell him of her cousin's having gone to town; but under present circumstances she rightly judged that no communication regarding his nephew would have much effect upon the squire. He had other things to think about. So, indeed, had she. For the time, Lawrence and his affairs were banished from her thoughts. It was better—notwithstanding the need in which she stood of sympathy—that he was not at home. His indignation against his uncle, whose guilt he would have taken for granted, would have been overwhelming, and impossible to restrain. It was difficult, indeed, for herself

to conceal the horror with which she regarded him. And it was so necessary to conceal it. In the case of one so subtle, to be forewarned was to be forearmed; and with so deadly a design in his mind the least thing was likely to arouse his suspicions. She fancied, in fact, that he already had them; that he glanced at her askance; and watched her as she waited on the invalid, with unusual attention. How she kept her wits about her was a wonder to herself, but she did so. She even promised him to do her best the next day to reason "his precious Popsy" out of her prejudice against the nourishment that had been specially recommended for her. "If she continues to be so fixed against it," he said, "I must devise some other form of food." He was going to make the doctor his cat's-paw, as before, Ruth felt, with a shudder.

Before the invalid had settled down for the night, the ex-Commissioner paid her a visit. Notwithstanding she had been ill so long, it was his first; but there was nothing surprising in that. He kept himself almost as secluded from his own family as from the outside world. What struck

Ruth was her grandfather's manner, which was for a wonder interested, and at the same time *distrait.* His tone, when he addressed his daughter-in-law, was unusually kind, for he had never liked her, and she knew it. He thought her full of fads and fancies, which he objected to because it prevented the undivided attention which was his due being paid to himself. He had probably not hitherto believed that her illness was a serious one; but it was plain that he did so now. Indeed, his very tenderness alarmed the poor woman, who afterwards inquired of Ruth whether her grandfather thought she was about to die, he was so civil.

Ruth met the inquiry with a smile, though it made her sick at heart, for she felt that the invalid had rightly interpreted his manner. Robert must have told him what he had told Mr. Grueby. It was only to be expected—if her suspicions of him were correct, and they grew stronger every hour—that he should thus prepare those about him for that termination of her illness which he had only too good grounds for foreseeing. But there was something else unusual in her grandfather's manner, though not

so significant. When not actually conversing with his daughter-in-law, he appeared as self-involved as herself and oblivious to what was going on. Was it possible that he was calculating the future? Forecasting the benefits that would be derived from her decease? That such an idea should enter into Ruth's mind was a proof how saturated it was with the thought of her uncle's delinquencies; for her grandfather was one of the most egotistic of men. If Mrs. Robert's fortune had been coming to him, he would doubtless have been interested enough in the matter; but his son's affairs were by no means his. He was independent of him. The idea of getting him off his hands, which would no doubt have occurred to him in the case of any other member of his family, could not exist as regarded Robert.

What then made him so preoccupied? Surely the son could never have confided to the father the wickedness he had in contemplation? Yet even this suggestion obtruded itself on the unhappy Ruth. The burthen of responsibility that had been laid upon her shoulders was, in fact, too great for them to bear. Another

twenty-four hours with this continued strain upon her mind, and with no one in whom to confide, would, she felt, overthrow its balance. Like a sick man, she longed for the morning, for if Mr. Percy was at home she felt he would not fail her.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MORE TROUBLE.

Before breakfast next morning Ruth took her telegram to the village post-office. It was a lovely day, but the glories of the summer morning had no charms for her. On the contrary, the contrast of the bright and beautiful landscape and pure sweet air, with the thoughts within her—which dwelt perforce on cruelty and crime and wrong—depressed her. That the earth should look so fair while such deeds were in contemplation, seemed to prove how little nature was in sympathy with man. As she passed "The Corner" she was astonished to see Mr. Richard Salesby in his garden at so early an hour. He was one of those gentlemen who like to have the world well warmed for them—as though it were their bath—before they step into it; if they ever "meet the sun upon the upland lawn," it is

because they have sat up all night. And indeed, to look at him, you would have said that this was exactly what Mr. Salesby had done. His appearance was unkempt, his beard unshorn, his scanty crop of iron-grey hair uncombed; the expression of his face was so wild and angry, as he stood at his garden gate, with his short black pipe in his mouth, that Ruth would have avoided him altogether if she could, but the footpath skirted his domain, and to have crossed the narrow road to the other side would have been self-evident in its purpose.

"Good morning, Mr. Salesby," she murmured as she drew near him.

"I see nothing good in the morning," was the unconciliatory reply, "nor for that matter in the afternoon neither; there's nothing good in the world, everything's bad, but especially women."

"That is not polite to myself, nor fair to your daughter," said Ruth, forcing a smile.

"As for yourself, then, I apologise," he answered, looking at her, not very steadily, because his whole body was swaying from side to side, but with a scrutinising glance that had no disfavour in it; "drunk or sober, I know a lady

when I see her. And you could not speak like that about my girl, if you wasn't straight. I don't think you know anything about her. Not that *I* want to know either. I've done with her."

"Done with her? Done with your daughter, Kitty? What *do* you mean?"

"Just what I say; neither more nor less; she's made her own bed and may lie on it. It's not your fault; no, nor *his* fault, though, mind you, if I catch him at Hillsland, I'll wring his neck for him—she's a downright bad 'un. A girl as 'ud deceive her own father, and such a father as I've been to her, too, as never denied her anything, and let her take her own way just as she pleased. Well, she'll deceive *him*, that's one comfort."

"Deceive whom?" was on Ruth's lips, but the words never passed them. A terrible fear took possession of her: quite as great, though of a different kind from that which had fallen upon her in the summer-house yesterday. If Kitty had deceived her father, perhaps she had deceived *her*, and in the same matter. Even in that moment of horror and despair she thought no ill of Lawrence. As this poor drunken creature had himself admitted, Lorry (if, indeed, it was her

cousin of whom he spoke) was not to blame. But if Kitty had fled to *him?* One little hand mechanically sought the gate, and clung to it, just as Mr. Salesby was clinging to it, and for the same reason, to prevent herself from falling.

"Ah, you know *now*," he said, with hideous sagacity. "She used to say as you were sweet upon him yourself. I was thinking about that this morning, but concluded it was only one of her lies to put me off the scent; but it seems she was telling the truth for once. Well, you had an escape; for though, as I just said, I don't blame him, as I blame her; he's a scoundrel and a liar too. She would never have gone to him without an invitation; and as sure as the sun is in heaven, if I ever again catch sight of him I'll wring his neck. A pretty thing, indeed; the oldest family in the county to end this way; 'came in with the Conqueror,' as the saying is, and gone out like a farthing candle. If he'd married her it would have been bad enough, but, of course, he won't marry her. My Kitty a light-o'-love, a trollop——" and the wretched father burst into tears.

"You are wrong, and are doing Kitty wrong," cried Ruth, for though what she meant was "you

are doing Lawrence wrong," the spectacle of the unhappy man in his grief was infinitely more touching than it had been in his tipsy wrath, and made her very heart ache. "It is not possible that she could so disgrace herself."

"Possible!" he echoed contemptuously; "she has confessed as much. I've got it under her own hand. That is I *had*, but I've torn up the letter. I want to see nothing more of her, or hers; never again, never again!"

"You have *not* torn up her letter, Mr. Salesby," said Ruth gently; "let me see it."

It was a bold stroke, the result of instinct rather than of reason, but it succeeded.

"I don't know whether I have or haven't," said the man doggedly; and as he spoke he drew it out of his pocket with his disengaged hand, which had been clasping it there all the time. "Yes, here it is. She wrote it last night, and left it on the table for me to see—a pretty sight for a father—and then went off by the morning mail. She must have walked ten miles with her little bag to meet it. She took nothing with her but her little bag. My poor Kitty! But there, I've done with her."

It was shocking to see his maudlin misery, to hear his vehement resolve to wash his hands of his daughter, but worse of all to listen to one of those touches of true pathos that bespoke him human still "under the mud." What gave Ruth some little comfort was the evident satisfaction of the wretched man in having found someone in whom he could confide, and even look for sympathy. She was no longer afraid of him, indeed he seemed to be afraid of *her*, as, having placed the letter in her hand, he waited with anxious look for the deduction she should draw from its contents, which were brief and curt enough.

"Father, I am going away to London, where it would be useless for you to look for me. I have found someone to care for me, which has not been, I must say, the case at home. In saying good-bye, however, I do not wish to blame you; the less inquiry you make about me, the better it will be for both of us. You need not fret about my future, which is provided for.—KITTY."

"Well, well, what do you think of it?" inquired Mr. Salesby impatiently. "Better than I do, to judge by your face."

This was not at all the case, so far as the

writer of that epistle was concerned. There was in fact but one inference to be drawn from it, which shocked and distressed Ruth exceedingly; but unless it was composed with great duplicity and the intention of throwing the reader off the scent, it seemed plain to her that the person, whoever he was, who had been found to "care for" the unhappy girl could not be Lawrence Merridew. That was not the language she would have used in his case, nor was it possible that "her future could have been provided for" by such a course of conduct. It was not to be expected, however, that the satisfaction Ruth derived from this conviction should be shared by Mr. Salesby, and indeed she felt no little remorse for having entertained it in the presence of such shame and sorrow. It was impossible to tell Kitty's father what she thought of the girl's intentions, so she took refuge in interrogation.

"Was your daughter acquainted with anyone in town to whom her expression 'caring for her' could possibly apply, so far as you know, Mr. Salesby?"

"Only one person, and you know him as well as I do, and better," he answered doggedly.

"If you mean my cousin, you are certainly

mistaken," she answered quickly. "I say nothing of his being a man of honour and incapable of a baseness; but he has hardly enough money to support himself, much less to insure the future of another person."

"Then you think no one has promised her marriage?"

Ruth was silent; she could not give the answer that was needed, and Mr. Salesby's face, like the Gorgon's, seemed to turn her into stone. She understood now that which he had hoped for, while pretending to denounce it, was that Kitty had found shelter with her cousin, who might at least "have made an honest woman of her," and that this hope had fled.

"Give me back her note," he said hoarsely. He took it and tore it along and across, and threw the pieces to the wind. "That is the last of her," he said. "I have done with her. Never speak to me about her again, Miss Ruth."

With that he staggered along the garden path, and passed into his house, slamming the door behind him. Ruth's heart bled for the poor drunken wretch. Under any other circumstances she would have thought of nothing else save

Kitty and her father. It was a tragedy sufficient to monopolise any mind. But unhappily there was another, darker still, and that had not yet reached its *dénouement*, which pressed upon her attention. For the moment, in this terrible domestic revelation, she had almost lost sight of it; but now the errand on which she had come out that morning recurred to her. On the one hand was ruin, which no action of hers could mitigate or deter; on the other was death, which it was possible for her to avert; in the one the blow had fallen, in the other the victim was only menaced. It behoved her to be up and doing, and to leave lamentation for a fitter time.

The post-office at Hillsland was a very small affair; it was a little shop where candles and string were sold in tiny quantities, and where nothing was kept in stock but lollipops. Bottles of them of different hues stood in the window, looking like a parody of a chemist's shop; it was not so long ago since Ruth herself had bought "bull's-eyes" and "peppermints" there; the old post-mistress had known her from a child, and could hardly picture her to herself as having grown up.

"Lawk-a-daisy! Miss Ruth, you *are* early this morning. And how's Mrs. Robert? I have heard as how she's very sadly."

"She is certainly very unwell. I want to send this telegram, please."

"Yes, sure. Elizabeth!" The old woman raised her voice to summons her niece, who was the telegraphist, from upstairs. "Well, I *am* glad as you are sending for another doctor. They think it so strange in Hillsland."

"But I am not sending for another doctor; I am telegraphing for Mr. Percy."

"Mercy me, the parson! She's so bad as that, be she?"

"Ruth answered nothing, but gave the girl her telegram, who read it out aloud: "I wish to consult you in connection with Lawrence. Urgent."

"Deary me, then," said the older woman, "the news must be true about Miss Kitty."

"What news?" inquired Ruth, with such unwonted sharpness and anger that it even struck the old gossip that she had put two and two —or rather, one and one—together a little hastily.

"Well, Miss Ruth, it was only my idea," she murmured apologetically, "but Jim Bell, the maltster, he did say as how he saw Miss Kitty step into the mail train this morning; and who could she be after, says I to myself, *except* Master Lawrence? She's been very queer ever since he went away, the servant girl up at 'The Corner' told our Martha, and we all know how thick they was together before, but I dare say *you* knows better."

"I know nothing of where Miss Kitty is gone, nor does my cousin either. This has nothing to do with her at all," said Ruth, hardly knowing what she said. All those suspicions had flocked round her again which Kitty's letter had put to flight.

Kitty's fondness for Lawrence (for poor Ruth preferred to put it *that* way, even to herself) was, it seemed, the talk of the village. Never surely had any girl such causes for wretchedness as herself. And yet it was absolutely necessary for her not to dwell upon them; to put herself out of sight and keep her head cool and her judgment clear for the sake of others.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Breakfast at the Hall that morning was for Ruth a cruel ordeal. Appetite, of course, she had none, and while she affected to eat she had to listen to the conventional talk about the invalid, which, for her, had acquired such a terrible interest.

Mrs. Merridew thought ill of "dear Rosa's" condition, while Miss Jane took an opposite, though it could hardly be called a more cheerful view; ascribed her aversion to food as partly affectation, and did hope that when the doctor came he would induce her to listen to reason, which it seemed Robert was unable to do.

Ruth did not dare visit the sick room for fear she should be detained, and Mr. Percy, or a telegram from him, arrive in her absence. She got Mrs. Merridew to take her place on plea of

a severe headache, which indeed was no pretence on her part, and kept in her own little sitting-room; its window commanded the road leading from the village, and at it she sat with her fevered brow pressed against the pane. We have most of us had to watch and wait in our time for events which Fate holds in her hand and distributes independently of our control; when poor Humanity sits like a beggar at the gate of the Future, and looks for scraps of comfort, too often in vain; but in Ruth's case there was not only anxiety but a weight of responsibility such as her young shoulders were hardly fitted to bear; the very issues of life and death might depend on her.

Though Mr. Percy could not arrive within two hours at earliest, a telegram might, but this, if he was not at home, she did not expect. He would understand her position; that her message was of her own sending, and not intended for publication of any kind, which a reply from him was likely to involve; for though, as she had put it to herself, Robert had other things to think of just now, the good clergyman would know nothing of that, and was aware that

Lawrence's name was hateful to his uncle. If he was only at home she knew she could trust to his tact as to his sympathy; but he might be away, and in his absence—on a pleasure tour, or a visit, or even a shopping expedition to the county town—on such small matters do our deepest interests depend—there might be murder done.

At last, on the summit of the hill, she beheld the sight she sought; the rector on his big black cob—his only personal extravagance, for it had been a costly animal—and riding at a rate that was very unusual with him. Tears of gratitude both to God and man sprang to Ruth's eyes. Half her anxieties, because she knew they would be shared, seemed to vanish at once.

How sweet is the sight of a friend in need! And this was no fair-weather friend. A man whose hand could be trusted to steady one over ever so deep a stream, and the clasp of which even in that last hour when the waters of death are rising had given assurance to many a sinking soul. As he galloped by, Ruth threw up the window and pointed to the stables; he drew rein at once, and having disposed of his horse

came on foot to the front door, where, as he knew, she would be waiting for him. She took both his hands, with a "Thank heaven!" instead of "Good-day," and led him to her boudoir.

"You have a charming view," he said, as he looked out upon it, to give her time—also because he saw she would have broken down had he looked at her, or touched at once the matter concerning which he had been summoned. "It commands the lake even better than Lawrence's old room did. Now what is it about our Lorry?"

"It is not about Lorry at all, dear Mr. Percy; I wish it were; a subterfuge which you will forgive" (for his brow had clouded), "and even commend when you know all. It is about Mrs. Robert."

"Your uncle's wife?"

"Yes, his wife," she answered, with a shiver. "The woman he has sworn to love and to cherish. He is murdering her by slow poison."

"Great Heaven! you must be dreaming, my dear Ruth. You have been sadly tried of late, I know; anxiety and sorrow——"

"Oh, pray at least believe that I have not lost my wits," exclaimed the girl beseechingly. This was the one difficulty that had not occurred to her in all her forecasts, and yet she was compelled to acknowledge that the suspicion was a natural one. "I am not mad, though I have suffered enough to make me so."

"I know, I know," he answered soothingly; "first one trouble and then another. Lawrence's going, and then your aunt's death, and now this illness in the house."

"It is about that that I want to speak," she murmured hoarsely. "I may be wrong; Heaven grant I may be found so; only listen to me; then judge for yourself."

He nodded and smiled, and drew a chair beside her own.

"Come, let us hear your story," he said encouragingly, as though she were a timid child.

Then she told it him, every detail of it, in a hushed voice, but quite distinctly and coherently. His face was full of interest throughout, but at first it was only tender and sorrowful. His interest was in the speaker alone, but as she went on it was transferred to the subject. His

face became anxious and troubled, then grave and stern. His brow grew dark, his lips moved inarticulately, unintentionally urged by the thoughts within him. He never interrupted her by a word.

When she had done he rose and paced the room.

"It is a terrible indictment," he murmured; "but his foreknowledge of the end and his concealment of it; the benefit he derives from her death; his necessity for a large sum of money; his making the porridge with his own hands, and his extreme solicitude that she should take it, though it has such ill-effects upon her; these, indeed, awaken suspicion. But, after all, we have no proof."

Ruth unlocked a drawer and took out the marmalade jar, covered and sealed up.

"There is the proof," she said. "It must be analysed."

"That is an excellent suggestion. You are a wise girl," he said.

"I would rather you still thought me mad," she sighed. "Not that I am really wise; but I have thought of little else for

the last twenty-four hours. You are something of a chemist, I know."

He shook his head. "This must not be touched save by some disinterested person. Maitland, the public analyst, lives at Coleborough. I will take it to him this very day. As this has been going on so long, there is probably no immediate danger of the man's design—if he has the design—being carried into effect. I will let you know the result at once. But what then?"

"Do not ask me. I have thought that out; if I did but know for certain, I could make all safe; of that I am convinced. It will be better that you should know as little as possible."

It was a serious thing this leaving so grave a matter to such young hands; but what the girl had already done showed her worthy of confidence. There was even risk in it to himself. Was it not his duty, if suspicion should be confirmed, to at once invoke the aid of the law? That meant public exposure—shame unspeakable to the very person whose life they were planning to preserve—the ruin of an honourable family.

"We must not condone a crime," he answered meditatively. "It is no less our duty to punish the guilty than to save the innocent."

"The guilty shall be punished; I swear it," replied the girl firmly. "But would this poor woman thank us for her life, if she knew that the man she calls 'the best of husbands' had, under the pretence of nursing her, been compassing her death for weeks? Do think of *her* as well as of him!"

"I am not sure I am right, Ruth; if I asked a lawyer he would say I am wrong. But I will trust you."

"Heaven bless you, Mr. Percy, for those words. You will never have cause to repent of them; you will be thankful for having uttered them." Her face was pale and wet with dew; her hands trembled as she wrapped the jar up in brown paper for her visitor to take with him. "You will ride fast, you will not lose a moment," she cried impatiently.

"My dear Ruth," he answered very gravely, "you must listen to reason. You are overwrought, as it is, and to dwell upon the matter, while it is yet unsettled, will drive you crazy.

It is absolutely necessary that you should divorce your mind from it. It is no use my riding fast to Coleborough. Maitland's office closes at two, and no speed could get me there in time to see him. But he shall have the jar to-night, with a letter from me to bespeak urgency, though of course saying nothing of the circumstances, and you shall hear from me to-morrow morning. In the meantime, if I am to retain my confidence in you, you must promise me to do your best to ignore the matter. You have now other things to think of."

She nodded and faintly smiled. Though the subject of her uncle's crime was monopolising her mind, as well it might be, she had certainly other topics—only less important than it, to engage her attention.

"They are not very cheerful things," she sighed; "but they are better than this thing, and I will try to think of them."

"Then why not talk of them while my horse is getting his corn, of which indeed he will stand in need before the day is out? Have you heard lately from Lawrence?"

"Mrs. Merridew has heard. He seems to

be getting on fairly well, and he has found good friends in London."

"In London? I thought he was with Sir Charles Walden."

"No, he has left Hurlby for some time; it was meant to be a secret, but I am sure you deserve his fullest confidence. And after all, what does it matter, what does anything matter, when such things are going on under this very roof."

Mr. Percy looked distressed and disappointed. This outbreak was only too significant of the fever of anxiety and impatience that was consuming the poor girl under that thin crust of dismissal she had put on to please him. Such thoughts *could* not be dismissed; all that could be hoped for was mitigation and postponement.

"We do not know these things are going on, Ruth," he answered mildly. "We hope they are not going on, and if they are, we are taking what means lie in our power to put a stop to them. What you tell me of Lawrence is very surprising. Is it decided that he is not going to Singapore, which he seemed to dread so?"

"Nothing is decided; though he has made up his mind, I think, at all hazards, to remain in England. No one here knows anything of his intentions or his movements, save his mother and myself; but he has gone to London in the hope of making a living by his pen."

"And who are these friends of whom you spoke?"

"They are a Mr. Latham and his two sisters. Lawrence was recommended to them by Sir Charles Walden. They seem to have been very kind to him."

"It is a great risk," he murmured; "Lorry is very young, and knows nothing of the world. I mistrust Sir Charles's friends."

"Why?"

"Because I mistrust Sir Charles. You have seen or heard nothing of *him*, I suppose, of late?"

"Nothing at all."

Mr. Percy had looked at her very searchingly as he put that question; but it had evoked no spark of interest, no flush of colour. However monopolising was the leading topic in her mind, if there had been anything serious between her

and the baronet, the mention of his name would surely have moved her a little. He was glad that it had not done so. It also left him free to speak his mind about the man.

"I hope Lawrence has not placed himself under obligations to Sir Charles."

"I cannot say that; it would indeed be most ungrateful not to feel them, for he has done him good service; has taken a great deal of trouble—which, as you know, is not his way—in launching him in literature; he has been a true friend to Lawrence."

"But not a patron, I hope. He has not lent him money?"

"No, certainly not. Lorry would not have liked anything of that kind." (There was interest and spirit in her tone for the first time as she said that.) "He put him in the way of earning something just to start with, that is all."

"I had hopes that your aunt, Mrs. Lock, might have left the lad something."

"She had nothing. Good Heavens! until this moment I had clean forgotten, by-the-bye, that she made me the custodian of some papers.

They are of no value, for the poor soul had no property of any kind; but she seemed anxious they should not fall into—into strange hands." She had been about to say "my uncle's hands," but repugnance, or the recollection that the topic was forbidden, restrained her. Mr. Percy attributed it to the latter cause, which gave him pleasure.

"That looks as if the papers *were* valuable," he answered smiling, "or why should she have been so careful? Let me look at them. She left no will, I suppose?"

"She had nothing to leave."

Ruth took the packet Aunt Jerry had given her from her desk, and gave it into Mr. Percy's hands. In the whirl of events which had taken place of late the possession of it had entirely slipped her recollection. If there was anything in it that required action, or even attention, she felt herself utterly unequal to cope with it now.

"Be so good as to take it," she said wearily, "and advise me if anything requires to be done. I feel like a child," then she added with a sweet smile, "and look to you as though you were my father."

"Then I have your permission to open it?"

"Of course. It is only adding a further weight to the peck of troubles which you are undertaking for my sake."

That she should thus express herself was some little proof of improvement of her mind running in a bye stream, away from the main channel.

Mr. Percy opened the packet, and examined its contents, which consisted only of a few documents. They seemed to interest him, however, for he did not speak for some minutes.

"Did your aunt say nothing to you of these papers, besides the injunction to take care of them?"

"Ruth started at his voice; the silence had been fatal to her resolution; her thoughts had reverted to the old topic. "I beg your pardon. I did not hear you."

He repeated his question.

"Aunt Jerry told me it was something about some shares in a mine; her husband had said, 'Stick to them.' I do not think she quite knew what she was talking about. She seemed to attach a value to them because of her husband's

words, though they were in fact worth nothing. That was the impression she produced on me."

"Just so; and most likely the correct one. I will, however, make inquiries into the matter. Now I must go."

He put the papers in the pocket of his coat, but Ruth's eyes were fixed on the other pocket, which held the marmalade jar. That was the only matter in which she felt an interest. If she had been told that her whole future would turn on the other it would have made no difference. So it is, indeed, with every life light that goes out amongst us, with which life-long love is not associated. For the moment, for the week, for even the month, the catastrophe is overwhelming. Nothing else is to be compared with it, or seems of any importance. Yet day by day and week by week, its impression grows weaker and weaker, and other things take its place; for life is a palimpsest.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PATRON'S EMISSARY.

Callers were rare in Nelson Crescent. Mr. Latham mixed with society at his club and found it quite enough for him. His sisters would have liked more of it, but the kind of people they would have welcomed would not have been very acceptable to their brother. It was in this matter only that his liberality to them was deficient. "Our dear brother will never ask anybody to the house." This was an advantage to Lawrence in one way, because being almost their only male visitor, the ladies made even more of him than they were naturally inclined to do; but on the other hand it prevented the circle of his own acquaintance from expanding. It was very well for Mr. Latham to be content with meeting friends of his own sex, mostly of his own age, and addicted to the

same studious pursuits as himself, but a young fellow who wishes to study life and know the world should have wider opportunities. Moreover, Lawrence did not belong to a club, and had to make or scrape acquaintances for himself. Some of them, thus casually picked up, he was only too glad to drop again; for Bohemia, prolific in scamps, has, alas! in its picturesque but somewhat barren territories not a few scoundrels.

Mr. Latham did, indeed, introduce him to one or two literary men of a high class, but they were mostly bachelors like himself. Mr. Martyn, however, one of the chief contributors to *The Areopagus*, was a married man, and had a charming wife. Lawrence soon became a great favourite of hers (he had the gift of getting on with nice women), and through her he began to know people worth knowing and to be regarded favourably. He was undoubtedly an interesting young fellow, and, unless in that section of society called "smart people," poverty and inexperience are no bars to social success in London. This led him into no extravagances, while at the same time it did not interfere with his literary work. He read a great deal, and

wrote most perseveringly. About nine-tenths of what he wrote came back to him like a boomerang. At first it hurt him, because it struck the bump of self-esteem, which in the young is a tender place; but presently he began to be inured to it, and though far indeed from coinciding with the opinion of his editors, that his contributions were sad rubbish, acknowledged to himself that there were reasons, if insufficient ones, for their rejection. Sometimes he re-wrote them (when they usually became worse than before; you can't mend blotting-paper), but generally he sent them to lower and lower periodicals (as the Cambridge racket player immortalised by Davey used to make his ball dap on the wall) till at last they found acceptance with *The Penny Trumpet*.

"I see your name, Mr. Merridew, everywhere," observed Mrs. Martyn, in her good-natured way.

"But in very queer places," he answered modestly, and, indeed, not without a blush, for *The Trumpet* was a good advertiser.

"Oh, but you shine in the Zenith as well as the Nadir."

"If you mean *The Areopagus* by the zenith," he replied (which she did because her husband wrote in it), "my appearances are very rare there."

Then he began to tell her, for he was frank as the day (which was one of the reasons of his popularity), and, like all young writers, loved to talk shop, what he did write for, and what he got.

"But you don't mean to say that you get twenty times—literally twenty times more from *The Areopagus* than what you say you get from *The Trumpet?*"

"Yes, I do; literally, exactly."

"Why, that's more than my husband gets," exclaimed the lady, which (her tone seemed to say) was outrageous.

"Oh, but," said Lorry hastily, "Mr. Latham alters my articles very much, and, indeed, they are as much his as mine."

"But that is a reason why he should give you less, not more," she answered. The position was incontrovertible.

Lawrence blamed his own want of reticence, and then, as he thought of the matter afterwards, a more serious consideration even than the

mischief he might have done obtruded itself. Though he had a good conceit of himself, he could not but put the question, "Why should I be paid more than Mr. Martyn, who in literature is far my superior?" His wife, as if to make amends for her astonishment, had said in her pleasant way, "You come under the most-favoured-nation clause, indeed!" And could it be that he *was* favoured? Did Mr. Latham pay him more than he was worth because he liked him, or because he was poor? The bare supposition of such a thing wounded him to the quick. Then he remembered that for his first article, a very short one, written from Hillsland before Mr. Latham had so much as seen him, that gentleman had sent him ten pounds. It could not, therefore, be charity that he had been receiving; and yet it was very strange that he should get more than Mr. Martyn. It was a subject that he could hardly broach to Mr. Latham; the editor of *The Areopagus* always shrank from pecuniary matters, and it would be odious to him to hear that his rate of payment for contributions had been the subject of discussion. On the very morning that Lawrence was puzzling himself

with this riddle, a visitor called in Nelson Crescent who could have answered it for him, and whose mission, indeed, had some relation to that very matter.

It was a visitor whom certainly Mr. Latham did not expect, but he was not unknown to him, a most respectable, taciturn-looking person, who might have been a divine, or a Buddhist of the first degree, or an undertaker—in fact Sir Charles Walden's very private secretary, Mr. Harbord.

Mr. Latham had no great regard for this gentleman, whom he suspected of knowing more of his friend's concerns than any man ought to know of another's, that is to say of being privy to matters that, like "faith and prayers" (though at the same time exceedingly unlike them), should be "among the privatest of men's affairs;" an instrument only too ready to his hand in transactions which are best let alone and in which it behoves no man to be an accessory. Perhaps, he did him wrong, for the editor of *The Areopagus* was peculiar in his views of his fellow-creatures. Very charitable, not to say stone blind to the errors of those he liked, he had a

great distaste for sinners who had not the advantage of his acquaintance, or who mixed in either a higher or a lower plane than himself. Friendship atoned for a good deal with him; gratitude, short-lived in most souls, was in his very tenacious of existence; but for human weaknesses of the lower kind in outside people he had much secret abhorrence. He had a suspicion that the modest and retiring Mr. Harbord was a low lot.

"Hullo! *you* in London," was his not very hospitable greeting. "I thought you were a fixture at Hurlby, like the heirlooms."

Mr. Harbord smiled as though his being likened to an heirloom, and at Hurlby, was rather a compliment than otherwise. "It is not often I am in town," he owned, "but just now a little business, if I may call it so, has called me up."

Mr. Latham looked at him with such disfavour that one might have thought the phrase "called up" had reminded him of the devil.

"What is it now?" he said; "some mischief, I'll be bound."

"Far from it, I assure you. Sir Charles left

word that I should see you as soon as possible after his departure."

"Departure! Where's he gone to? I thought he was at Hurlby."

"No, he has gone abroad."

"Abroad! Why, I had a letter from him a week ago, without a word of his going abroad in it."

"It was rather sudden. Circumstances beyond his control precipitated it."

"Some very agreeable circumstance, no doubt," said Mr. Latham with scornful irritation.

"I never said—that is, I know nothing about it."

"What an infernal fool he is," exclaimed the other, with apparent inconsequence. "There is no fool like an old fool."

"That is a matter which you can scarcely expect me to discuss, Mr. Latham," said the secretary mildly.

"Quite right. I was a fool myself to make to you, of all men, such an obvious observation. And it was also unbecoming. Well?"

"Sir Charles asked me to say, as it is

probable he may be away for some considerable time and will not be corresponding with him, that he would like, if possible, some provision—some permanent provision—to be made for a young gentleman in whom he feels a great deal of interest, Mr. Lawrence Merridew. If it could be done without his becoming aware of who was his benefactor, through some means connected with literature, he would be particularly obliged."

"Make him a bogus offer of £1000 for one of his sketches of London life, I suppose?"

"Just so, something of that nature," said Mr. Harbord imperturbably.

"I will be a party to no such duplicity," said Mr. Latham hotly. "You may tell Sir Charles—since he does not condescend to communicate with me personally upon the subject—that I repent what I have done for him in this matter already."

"One moment," interposed Mr. Harbord, with unexpected and indeed unexampled promptness. "I should have said at first, but that I thought it impossible for you to have taken umbrage in the case of so old a friend, that time did not admit of Sir Charles seeing you; while to write

of the thing was—well—letters sometimes fall into other hands than those they are intended for. The matter is a delicate one."

"Then let him undertake it himself; he has more tact than I have."

"There are reasons which make it impossible that Sir Charles could—just now—enter into personal relations with Mr. Merridew. Any overtures from him, however generous, would be misconstrued."

"Good Heavens! Sir Charles has not run off with Miss What's-her-name, Merridew's cousin, surely!"

"Dear, dear, how could such an idea enter your mind!" exclaimed Mr. Harbord in a tone of great distress. "Most certainly not."

"I am glad to hear it, for let me tell you, and you may tell your—I mean Sir Charles—that if anything of that nature had taken place, he and I would have had nothing more to say to one another. I have a great regard for Mr. Merridew."

"Surely, surely, and so has Sir Charles, as indeed he has demonstrated. His only desire is to benefit him."

"Then let him do it in a straightforward fashion. As I was about to say, I already repent, not indeed of having assisted this young man—far from it—but of having done so by underhand means. The giving him larger sums for his contributions than they were worth, however well intended, was an error, and you may tell Walden that it must come to an end. It has put this young man in a fool's paradise. He is working hard and getting on, but he naturally imagines he is doing better than he is. If it was only himself who was concerned, as I thought was the case when Sir Charles proposed the plan, there would have been no great harm in it, but the lad is trying to make a home for his mother and a cousin, to whom I understand he is engaged to be married."

"Oh, is he?" exclaimed Mr. Harbord with great interest and in a tone of relief; "then that will simplify matters."

"I don't see how. On the contrary, it seems to me to complicate them. I say, considering the difficulties and responsibilities with which the young man is surrounded, it is abominable to keep him in the dark as to his true position. I

suppose I must tell him that *The Areopagus* can't afford to pay so well as it did."

"That is easy enough," observed Mr. Harbord naïvely.

"Easy as lying always is to some people," retorted Mr. Latham, "but it is also a humiliation, though *that*, too, some people find it easy to stomach."

"Very true," assented the other, nodding his head as if in assent to some abstract proposition. "I'll write to Sir Charles what you say."

"Upon my life you are a cool hand," exclaimed Mr. Latham, not without a touch of admiration.

"I never allow sentiment to interfere with business, that is all," answered the other modestly; "I cannot afford it. Sir Charles can."

"*I* know," said Mr. Latham, amused in spite of himself. "His recent departure from our shores is probably not altogether disconnected with it? *Cherchez la femme*, eh?"

"I am unacquainted with the French language," returned Mr. Harbord regretfully. "Then I am to say that you decline to be Sir Charles's almoner altogether, even to the extent

that you have hitherto been. It seems hard on Mr. Merridew."

"It *seems* hard; but, as I have said, it would, in my opinion, be harder on him to continue any further deception. This is unintelligible to you, no doubt. I am afraid you may not make the case quite clear to Sir Charles. If you will give me his address I will write to him myself."

"I do not know Sir Charles's address. I believe he has gone to Naples, but he does not wish any letters to be forwarded."

"Then I have nothing more to say," said Mr. Latham—"except," the extreme dryness of his tone seemed to suggest, "that you are the greatest liar in Europe."

"I am sure I was right," said the editor when he found himself alone, "though I believe Walden's regard for our friend to be perfectly genuine. But there is something strange in his employing this fellow as his intermediary. What could he have meant by saying that his master's generosity might be misconstrued by our young friend? that it might be rejected is obvious enough, but why misconstrued?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST RESORT.

The day is over at last with its painful service, never grudged before, in the sick-room. The doctor has been, and the matter of the porridge has been once more discussed: he is still of opinion that it should be persisted in, but if the invalid's dislike of it continues, a strong soup is to be substituted, which "the best of husbands" undertakes to administer to his Popsy with his own hands. As he brings her the porridge again (of which she takes a few spoonfuls with loathing), Ruth marvels to see them so white and clean; so highly wrought and abnormal is her nervous condition that she looks for blood upon them. She notes, however, keenly enough that "dearest Robert" never suffers the cup to leave his hands, and takes it, with what is left, away with him. In other matters he is not so careful to save trouble. It

is surely impossible that she has awakened suspicion; yet Uncle Robert speaks to her with unwonted gentleness, remarks on her wearied and anxious looks (as well he may), and drops a hint that it may be necessary to send her somewhere for a few days to recruit her health. She finds herself assenting with a smile, that seems to tear her cheek, and he pats it—and she bears even that—with approbation, and wishes his Popsy were as sensible.

This nightmare of the day is worse than that of the night; but the night is hideous. When exhaustion compels her at last to sleep, the story of the day goes on, and she wakes with a cry of "Murder!" The innocent morn breaks with song of bird and scent of flower; the sun kisses the grey lake and makes it young again; but freshness and beauty have lost their charms for her. She sits at the open window, and sees nothing but the winding road, along which no messenger can come for hours. Yet if she missed him, if by any chance the note he bears should fall into other hands—*his* hands! That idea is terrible. She grudges every glance that is cast elsewhere. The breakfast the maid brings up to her—for to

descend and meet the eyes and answer the questions of her relatives is now beyond her power—lies untasted on the table. But she knows all that man can do Mr. Percy has done; that urgency has been insisted upon, secrecy maintained; he is a friend in whom she can trust. Oh! fools and blind who assert that man is independent of his fellows, and can dispense with their sympathy and help; they can almost as easily dispense with God's help. But for that perfect confidence Ruth must have lost her wits.

Her door is locked, and when Mrs. Merridew comes to ask after her she replies as if from her bed. She can see no one, think of no one, except that unknown messenger. It is like waiting for death. At last he comes: a man upon the black cob, which is never ridden as she knows by any but his master, but which has for once been entrusted to another. It is early in the afternoon, but she runs unbonneted down a little staircase that leads to a side door, and out into the blinding sunshine; this is foolish of her, because it may cause comment, but she dare not return for headgear. As the messenger draws nigh she pretends

to be gathering flowers, and as he nears her looks up, as if with curiosity, shading her eyes with her trembling hand. He draws rein at once, and with a satisfied air, like one who fulfils a mission with unexpected facility, says, "Miss Stratton, I believe; master has bidden me give this letter into your own hand." She takes out her scanty purse, and though she feels inclined to empty its whole contents into his hand, gives him but half-a-crown.

Her fear is he will put up his horse for a rest, as the custom is with a friend's groom, and have a chat with the servants; but Mr. Percy has thought of that. The man has orders to leave another letter at another country house by one o'clock, where ale is also to be got, and better than is brewed at Hillsland Hall. The groom, well pleased, touches his hat, turns round and gallops off, as unconscious of the importance of the message he has brought as any postman. She crumples up the note in her hand and flies back to her room. The meeting she has looked forward to with such anxious impatience for four-and-twenty hours has not taken two minutes. But it is some time before she opens the note.

She has fallen on her knees first and prayed to her Heavenly Father that He might see fit to prove her awful suspicions baseless. He does not see fit. The note is but a slip of paper signed by the public analyst: "The porridge contains antimony, a slow poison."

There was not one word beside; but she had made up her mind, as she had told Mr. Percy, what to do in case this very thing should come to pass, and he had had confidence in her judgment and left her to do it. It was well that there was no need for consideration now, for there was no time to spare for plan-making, nor had she any longer the head for it; it was clear enough, but—like a weapon apt for striking, but useless for defence—it was fit for action only. She sat down, however, and wrote these few lines in a firm hand :—

"It has been discovered that you have been attempting to murder your wife by poison. The porridge made by your own hand and offered by it to her yesterday was not thrown away as you were told. It has been sent to the public analyst, and he has found antimony in it. You will be given twelve hours from the moment

that you have read this exactly. Then the law will take its course."

She placed this in an envelope and directed it to her uncle, and then put it in her bosom. It must be given to him with her own hands. Even without that he would have known from whom it came by her handwriting, but she wished him to know. There was personal danger to herself in such an act, there was no knowing to what extremity rage and despair might drive him; but that consideration never crossed her mind.

Luncheon was already over, and she found that her uncle had been making inquiries about her, and had been present at it; perhaps he would not have been had she been there. It was her desire to see him alone, but she found this difficult. He remained in his father's room occupied, it was said, with business matters; and then he went out of doors without, as was his wont, first paying a visit to the sick-room. It seemed as though, warned by some instinct of danger such as wild beasts possess, he was purposely avoiding her. It was fortunate for him (as she thought) that the time that was to be allowed for his escape had been left in her own

hands (she had not the least doubt that he would use it as was intended, and not brave the matter out); had the twelve hours dated from the moment Mr. Percy had known the worst, the man would have had small chance indeed.

Ruth had been with the invalid the whole afternoon, awaiting him, and it was almost evening when she heard his step in the passage. She passed quickly through the ante-room, and stopped him as he stood on the threshold with the cup in his hand—just as had happened before. But this time there was something in her look that alarmed him, and as though fearing she would take the cup, he mechanically withheld it from her.

"Put it down," she said, pointing to a little table that had stood outside the room since his wife had been taken ill, for convenience' sake, to hold trays and phials; "here is a letter for you."

"A letter?" he stammered.

"Read it." As she spoke the words she did not recognise her own voice. Then she added "Go;" the resonant word seemed to echo in the long gallery, and to be taken up again in the

great hall on to which it looked. Then she closed the door upon him—in his face—and shut him out for ever. She listened, but though she heard no footsteps, she felt that he was no longer there—sure as though she had seen his livid and fear-stricken face that he had read the letter and slunk away: that she had done with him.

Time went on, but there was no inquiry about him. Only one person was likely to inquire; the sick woman had done so an hour or two ago, finding him later than usual, but not altogether sorry perhaps that the loathsome nourishment he brought with him was delayed, she had dropped asleep. She looked worse than she had ever looked, so far as health was concerned, but otherwise more comely; exhaustion and want of sustenance had given her a delicate appearance and idealised such attractions as she possessed. In Ruth she awoke an unspeakable compassion when in a faint voice she presently asked, "Where is dear Robert?" The girl was unable to reply. Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Mrs. Merridew, who was in the room, exclaimed—

"I can't think, I'm sure," with unwonted irritation, for to do him justice, it was not Robert's way to thus neglect his wife. "I'll go out and inquire where he is."

She had not gone long, and came back with a cheerful face. "He will be here very shortly, my dear."

Ruth's heart sank within her. He was going to brave it out, then, after all. But as Popsy, with knitted brow, turned her wan face to the wall with a sigh of impatience, Mrs. Merridew whispered in her niece's ear, "It is very strange, but they tell me that your uncle has gone to bathe in the lake. John saw him going there with a towel in his hand. It is so late for bathing. What is the matter, Ruth? You look as white as a sheet."

"My headache has come on again. I am afraid I must go back to my room."

Ruth knew at once what was about to happen—probably, indeed, *had* happened. It horrified her, of course; she felt the shock in every fibre of her frame. But if she could have averted the catastrophe she would not have done it. It was better that this sinful wretch should

have fallen into God's hands than into man's. If allowance could be made for him, He would make it, as it would be made by no earthly tribunal. Ruth was a woman, and a very broken-hearted one, but from the milk-and-water sentiment that weeps over ruthless ruffians, and ignores their victims, she was free. She had confidence in the All-Wise. She did not assume that a soul is lost because it is "hurried into eternity," whether by a man's own act or another's.

It was a terrible alternative, no doubt, but it was better so, not only for the man himself, but —what was of greatly more consequence—for the innocent and unsuspecting woman he had plotted to destroy, and for the family on whom his earthly punishment would have brought shame and ruin. It might even be said that Robert Stratton's end became him as nothing in his life had done; it was a crime, but one that was calculated to benefit his fellow-creatures. His leaving the world had been a legacy of good to it, while his remaining in it would have been the source of widespread and insupportable misery. To the eyes of common sense—though

it was not through them that Ruth regarded it —it was the very best thing, though only of very bad things, that could have happened. She had pictured him flying from the hands of justice, residing in this or that Alsatia of scoundrelism, appearing and disappearing, caught and uncaught, always a menace and terror to his unhappy wife, and all belonging to him. This at least would be spared her.

She sat in her room awaiting the discovery of what had happened, like one who has already received a telegram and awaits details. She knew what had happened as though she had seen it. It was a moonlit night, and when the squire did not return, they sought for him as though it had been day. They found his clothes upon the lake shore. In some cases this would not have been final; there have been men who have had sufficient reason for effacing themselves who have made believe to die, and gone away, in hopes to begin life again without encumbrance or with impunity from their transgressions, but Robert Stratton—or so his niece concluded—was not of this class. He was too masterful, too insolent by nature, to endure so humiliating a

position—moreover, the lake was not the sea. Indeed, before morning dawned the drag-nets found him. He was a strong swimmer, but the evening was chill, and no doubt, thought all the world (save two persons), the cramp had seized him.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

NEWS INDEED.

On the second morning after the catastrophe at Hillsland Hall, Lawrence received a letter, but not from home. It was a foreign letter; the handwriting of it was familiar enough, but its postmark, "Naples," astonished him not a little. What on earth could have taken Kitty Salesby to Naples? It had no address on it, and was without its usual beginning: no "dear Lawrence," nor even "dear Mr. Merridew," which, indeed, would have been almost as strange as none. It might have been a memorandum. "When you have received this it will be the last time that you will hear from me, and, as I would vainly hope, hear *of* me. I shall be dead to you, and, what is worse, disgraced. If you think of me at all—and it is better not—you need not think of me as being as miserable as I deserve

to be. If I am not happy, I never expected to be so, and I am not less so than I should have been had I been your wife: my future is secured. There are many women who, with the man they love, could patiently endure all the stings and sorrows of poverty. This is not my case. You will say 'Then what can such a woman's love be worth?' And you will be quite right. You are loved by a far worthier woman. I pray—no I dare not do that—I hope and believe that you will be happy with her. All that I ask is that you will never speak to her of me when she has become your wife. It is strange that one like me should shrink from what is said of me, but I do shrink from that. Spare me for the sake of old times, and also, for the sake of them, forget me."

This then was the reason why for days he had not heard from Hillsland. Kitty had fled from her home, under what circumstances it was only too easy to guess, but with whom? She had always been reticent to him concerning her own affairs. He was not even aware that she had an acquaintance outside her own sphere of life or her immediate neighbourhood. The hints

she had dropped to him from time to time of her liking for luxury and wealth had seemed to him to be of the most abstract kind; that she should have had any particular design in her mind with respect to any individual had never entered his head. If she had married a rich man he could have borne it. She had frankly told him—as, indeed, she now repeated—that his love would not reconcile her to the endurance of poverty; but that she should have preferred a life of gilded shame (for to that his quick intelligence perceived at once her letter pointed) to the humble, but honest, livelihood his love could have provided for her was wormwood to him. His affections were not so much wounded as his *amour propre*—he felt not only injured, but insulted. What, if he had been writing of another person, as a professional story-teller, he would have described as very significant of his state of mind, he felt Kitty's reference to his cousin as an insult. What right had a woman who had so disgraced herself to express an opinion even in the way of commendation of a girl like Ruth? Of course, she was a worthless woman, but the statement from such lips was,

to say the least of it, an impertinence. Those lips, however, had not, so far as he was concerned, been foresworn. She had never promised to marry him, though he was sure she had at one time loved him. Was it the eyes of that love —of jealous love—that had recognised what he had been blind to, that Ruth herself loved him? And had they seen aright? That he found himself thinking of *that* matter was also very significant. It often happens that when a gentleman is thrown over by lady No. 1, that he is induced by pique to turn an occasional glance in the direction of lady No. 2, or, indeed, any number. He is not very particular about the existence of much previous affection. But in this case there was a young lady who had been always No. 2, and only second in his regard to No. 1. If he had not been a fool, Sir Charles had hinted to him more than once, Ruth *would* have been his No. 1. The baronet had, as we know, expressed his opinion to him that Ruth was every way, even in beauty, Kitty's superior, while pointing out to him the folly and impracticability of his passion for Kitty. And Sir Charles was certainly a good judge of his

fellow-creatures, especially the female portion of them. How he would smile to himself when he came to hear of this termination of his "love affair," as he had always somewhat contemptuously termed it. Not that he would not be sorry for the poor girl, for he was a kind-hearted fellow, but it would corroborate the opinion he had always had of her unsuitability for his young friend, and we all like our sagacity proved by demonstration.

Lawrence felt that his next interview with that Patron of Letters, as Mr. Latham called him, would be very embarrassing. That he should have thought of Sir Charles at all, under such circumstances, showed that he was not so very hard hit; that his anger was at least as strong as his sense of loss; but he did think about him and also, and much more, of Ruth. It struck him for the first time that he had not been so grateful to her as he ought to have been, for the countless kindnesses she had done him. He had taken them too much as a matter of course. He had entertained, it is true, the very highest opinion of her, and had been intensely indignant at the idea of Sir Charles paying court

to her. That had been rather a dog-in-the-manger feeling, had it not? Well, he was not now quite so sure of that. There was one sentence in Kitty's letter which, while on the one hand it gave him satisfaction, on the other disgusted him more than all the rest; it seemed to have been interpolated into the epistle, and was out of harmony with the remainder; it might have been written for his comfort, and upon the whole he thought it was; but it might have been the naïve and unconscious expression of self-content: "My future is provided for." This did away with much of the apprehension he would otherwise have entertained on her account, but with it much of the bitterness and sorrow. How absolutely impossible was it that under similar circumstances (themselves, however, impossible) his cousin could have so expressed herself. Thus his reflection continued, flying from Ruth to Kitty, from Kitty to Ruth, but always with a tendency—as a "homing" pigeon can only with difficulty be taught to fly both ways—to remain with the latter. If that result, as no doubt it was, had been Kitty's object, she had succeeded. Work for

The Areopagus (which always strained his powers) was utterly out of the question that morning, and even *The Penny Trumpet* went without its usual "copy."

He threw down his pen as he seldom did, however indisposed for intellectual exertion, and took his way to Nelson Crescent. He was in a frame of mind—depressed, dissatisfied with himself, in trouble—when the society of kindly, honest gentlewomen is especially attractive; he had not the least intention of making confidantes of either Miss Latham, but the knowledge of the existence of sympathy, even if not asked, is comforting; and Lawrence Merridew in heart, as indeed in years, was still little more than a boy. As he entered the house, the door of Mr. Latham's sanctum, always inviolate to callers in the morning, was opened by that gentleman himself.

"Come in, Lawrence," he said, "I want to have a few words with you."

The editor was always kindly to the young fellow, but it was the first time Merridew noticed he had called him by his Christian name. In his voice too there was a gentle gravity that did

not escape the latter's ear. If his literary talents were but moderate, Lawrence Merridew had the faculty of observation highly developed.

"Sit down and take a cigar; there is nothing like tobacco for putting a man at ease both with himself and his friend."

"I am always at ease with you, Mr. Latham; if too much so, it must be laid to the door of your own kindness."

"That is nicely said. I don't wonder at Sir Charles liking you. All generous natures exaggerate little services; and when you say a gracious thing, you mean it, which is deuced rare. We are friends, as you say, and I am about to take the liberty of a friend. I want to know how you are getting on in the world—exactly. You make your own living, of course?"

"Oh, yes; I have even put something by: so small that it is not worth mentioning. But I make more one week almost always than the week before. Some people might call it hard work, but it is a labour of love. I am never so happy as when I have my pen in my hand, though what it writes is, I dare say, often very sad stuff."

"It does vary," said Mr. Latham comically.

"I hope so," returned Lawrence, with an answering smile. "Sometimes my highest aspiration is that in the revolving years I may one day write a successful shilling shocker."

"That is modest, at all events."

"Yes; but depressing. On the other hand I sometimes feel as if I had really some good stuff in me; but for that—— But you know all about it."

"I know something about it. But go on, you are always frank, and yet I see you have something on your mind. If it is anything about your work let me hear it."

Here, it struck Lawrence, was an opportunity to make a clean breast of it, as respected *The Areopagus*. If his conversation with Mrs. Martyn should ever come to Mr. Latham's ears, he felt it would annoy him exceedingly; but it was such a delicate subject.

"It is nothing about my work."

"Well then, I will say what I have got to say. What would be your reply if somebody was to offer you £1,000 for a one volume novel, the subject to be selected by yourself?"

"I should say he was playing a very poor joke upon me."

"But if he was serious in his offer?"

"Then I should say that under the transparent pretence of buying a book of me, he was giving me £1,000."

"Well?"

"In that case, I hope—indeed, I am quite sure—that I would not take it. I should be making a very good bargain, but at the cost of my self-respect. If you are really serious, Mr. Latham, such a proposition can have been made only by one man. It is prompted, no doubt, by the noblest generosity, but I had hoped from what he knows of me——" The colour rose to the young man's cheek, his eyes were full of tears, that *amour propre* of his, of which he had a great and, indeed, unusual supply, was wounded for the second time that morning.

"Then we will say no more about it," said Mr. Latham kindly.

"But, indeed, sir, I should like to have something said, to Sir Charles I mean; I will write myself to Hurlby."

"No, no; let the matter drop. It was only

a tentative experiment, and I am glad it has resulted as it has done. I felt that it would be so. It will not be repeated, you may be quite sure. And it is no use you writing to Hurlby, for Walton has gone abroad, to Naples, I believe, but he has left no address."

"To Naples!" repeated Lawrence in a low, hoarse voice. "Great Heavens; then it is he who is the villain."

"The villain! Well, really—of all the names—what the deuce is the matter with you, my poor boy?"

"Oh, nothing, sir," replied the lad, with a feeble smile, and speaking with exceeding bitterness. "I have only lost a friend; or found the difference between a friend and a patron. He has seduced a girl in our village for whom he knew I had a regard, and gone away with her; and now he offers me £1,000 as a *solatium*. It was well done, indeed, and like a gentleman."

Mr. Latham looked very distressed and embarrassed. "This is sad news, Lawrence. If it be true, I have nothing to say except that Sir Charles Walden was at one time my friend, and I am quite sure *your* friend: that he had no

other motive, certainly no mean one, for the interest he took in you, save a genuine regard."

"I believe that, I *feel* that," answered Lawrence slowly, "and that is what makes it so much the worse for *me*. There is nothing, as you say, to be said of this man; no sort of excuse, no palliation; I have done with him. All that remains is to rid myself of all that is possible in the way of obligation. You know more about this than I do. I suspect—even as regards *The Areopagus*——"

"There is no need to suspect anything," put in Mr. Latham quickly. "I will make a clean breast of it; Walden wrote to me to help you by whatever means I could. He suggested that I might pay you a little higher for your contributions than I should perhaps have done upon their merits. It was wrong of me, I feel that now; the difference was, after all, but small, and your contributions have been very few. It is not worth thinking about."

"I should like to know—exactly, if you please—what the difference was," said Lawrence. "It must be returned to him."

"That shall be done, only remember that

henceforth, if you cease to offer me any articles, I shall conclude you have not forgiven me. If our business relations close—in which there will certainly be no favouritism—it will interfere with our friendship."

"You are very good to me, Mr. Latham."

"If I am, it is from the angelic character of my disposition, and not because I owe you any compensation; fix that in your mind, please, and let us have done with this disagreeable subject. Something has occurred of far more importance, and which affects you very nearly. You have not, I suppose, read the newspapers this morning. Well, there is something in them concerning a relative of yours. It is bad news. Your mother writes to me——"

"Nothing has happened to Ruth?" exclaimed Lawrence, with feverish anxiety.

"No," said Latham smiling; "I don't think your gentle emotions, from what you have told me, will be severely tried by the occurrence, but your Uncle Robert is dead."

CHAPTER XL.

WISE AT LAST.

There is a general impression in the world that when a man is dead all that was evil in him is, among persons of charitable disposition at least, forgotten as well as forgiven; that the phrase *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* applies not only to the speech of his fellow-creatures, or at least the worthier portion of them, but to their thought.

There is nothing more false than this idea, which is moreover ridiculous. Memory is not destroyed in us by the death of another, though it may temper our judgment of them with mercy. In the case of Robert Stratton, the Latin proverb would have been difficult indeed to work out in practice, from the complete absence of the *bonum* in his character; the nearest approach to it was to keep silence. Lawrence Merridew was of a kindly disposition, certainly not of a revengeful

one—but the lines of the French poet with reference to the tomb would have applied to him—

> *"Rien jusqu'ici poursuivre une mémoire,*
> *Rien excepté la vérité;"*

and the truth was not to be spoken.

"Robert dead?" he said, "how did that happen?" For not having heard of his being ill, he naturally ascribed his decease to accident.

"He was drowned in the lake while bathing."

"Good Heavens!" Even this expression of sorrowful amazement was not, it seemed, evoked by the occurrence, for he immediately said: "How dreadful it will be for my poor mother and Ruth to be left with Aunt Jane."

"It is not that reflection, let us hope," said Mr. Latham, "that caused your mother to take the step she has done; though on another account one might almost wish it were. The fact is, your cousin Ruth has been seriously affected—upset, I suppose, as she well might be—by this painful catastrophe."

"I will go down to Hillsland at once," said Lawrence, rising from his chair.

"That is unnecessary, my good fellow, for

your mother is bringing your cousin up with her to town. The doctor has insisted on it. They will arrive this very evening."

"And they don't write me one word about it," said Lawrence in an injured voice.

"We must not think about ourselves," observed Mr. Latham gently, "when one's dear ones are in trouble. Your mother had no doubt her reasons for writing to us—for my sister has also got a letter from her—it was probably to save time, of which there was none to lose, and of course she knew I should communicate with you."

"They will come, of course, to my lodgings at once," exclaimed the young fellow excitedly. "There are two rooms there to let. They will live with me. I will work for them as no man has worked before. Poverty will have no terrors for them compared with what they have suffered. Poor as the fare will be that I may give them, it will not be so bitter as the bread of dependence."

Mr. Latham smiled, for the young fellow not only looked confidence itself, in his powers to maintain his relations, but also exceedingly happy.

"I am afraid your hospitality cannot just at

present be accepted. Your cousin will require a good deal of attention and comforts such as she would hardly find at Mrs. Levison's. Your mother has told my sisters the sort of lodging—'the more permanent or likely to be permanent,' she says, 'the better'—she will require, and they are gone out to look for them."

"That is like their kindness, but—well, I am sure they will understand that it is only the urgency of the case which has caused my mother to encroach upon it."

"Encroach? Why, it's the sort of errand they both delight in. They will increase their information about their neighbours, patronise them, order things from the shops—it's their notion of a liberal education. It's a compliment, too, for it shows you have given her a good account of their judgment."

"My only fear is that my dear mother, who has had nothing to do with housekeeping for years, may overrate her resources. For the present, of course, my cousin's health is the one thing to be considered, but as to permanency, I fear——"

"My dear Lawrence, you are a very clever

fellow," interrupted Mr. Latham, smiling, "but I don't think you understand these matters as well as my sisters. They will cut their coat according to the cloth, of the dimensions of which they have had full instructions. We will let you know where your folk are to be found this evening; they will be met at the station, of course, but not by you; your cousin's condition precludes the display of emotion in public—and I wish everybody else's condition did. And now my advice to you is to go home and do a good day's work; it is the best panacea for troubles and anxieties of all kinds, and in your case should be an earnest of your future. If you can't use your pen, because you are not happy in your mind, you should not have entered the literary calling."

There was an authority in Mr. Latham's tone, such as he had never used before, and the good sense of his advice was undeniable.

Lawrence went back to his lodgings, and after a severe struggle got interested in his theme: a small matter it may be thought, or possibly even a discreditable one, but his success was in fact a matter of great importance. For as the editor had hinted, if a man who means to live by

his pen has not the power of putting away sorrow, or joy, nay even anxiety and despair itself from his heart—or at all events from his head—when work demands it, he had better give up his calling at once, for he has proved himself unfitted for it. Lawrence worked with a will, and the thought that he was working for others gave a spur to his exertions.

At six o'clock word came to him that his people had arrived in Cheshunt Street, a locality midway between his lodgings and Nelson Crescent. Full as his mind was of the coming meeting, he noticed as he stood at the door that the house was a large one, and had flowers in the windows, which is not usual at that end of the town; and it gave him pleasure, for he felt that to country eyes this would be a welcome.

His mother received him with open arms and many tears.

"We have been in great trouble, as you know, Lorry. What has happened shocked us all, of course, but it has affected dear Ruth in a manner we did not expect; we had no idea she was so emotional. I am afraid that this evening she is too utterly fatigued and worn out to see

you. Don't look so disappointed, my darling," —for his face had lengthened considerably—"at having only your poor old mother to talk to."

Lawrence responded in a manner that soon procured his forgiveness: and indeed his heart had smitten him. The young fellow with all his "fancies," as she termed what was unintelligible to her in him, she was well aware dearly loved her, and was remorseful enough at the bare thought of having wounded her. She told him the whole story of what had happened at Hillsland (so far as she knew it). It was very shocking, of course, but even upon herself it had not produced a more terrible effect than upon dear Ruth. The poor widow, who, strange to say, however, seemed, so far as her ailment was concerned, no worse, kept murmuring to herself, "The best of husbands, the best of husbands!" Ruth could not bear to hear it, though since he was gone there was now no harm in such an hallucination. Of course, it would have been her duty under such circumstances to stay by the invalid, especially as Jane's ministrations were not welcome to her, but they had left her perforce. Moreover, two of Mrs.

Robert's sisters had been telegraphed for, and were to arrive that day. The doctor had resolutely insisted upon Ruth's immediate departure from the scene of the catastrophe.

"A wise resolve," put in Lawrence, "but from what I remember of the man I wonder he had the good sense—and, indeed, the courage in the face of Aunt Jane—to propose it."

"Oh, but Jane was not averse," said Mrs. Merridew naïvely; "as her sisters-in-law were coming we were not indispensable, and, indeed, I think she was rather pleased to get rid of us."

"Then I applaud her for the first time in my life," said Lawrence gravely, "but especially the doctor."

"Well," said Mrs. Merridew hesitating, and with a little flush, "there was somebody behind him who I fancied suggested the idea, and certainly advocated it very strongly — Mr. Percy."

"Mr. Percy? Oh, how good of him—and how like him—to come to you in your trouble."

"Yes, he was with us the whole day; indeed, both days. He took everything on his

shoulders, for you know what your poor grandfather is, how little fitted for domestic emergencies."

"*I* know," said Lawrence, in no very appreciative tone.

"So Mr. Percy was invaluable. He took a particular interest in dear Ruth, who, you remember, was always a favourite of his, and not only planned our departure, but suggested our writing to Miss Latham."

"And *Mr.* Latham," added Lawrence, in a reproachful tone. "Why was it not I who was written to?"

"Well, we had so little time, dear," said his mother confusedly, "and there were matters of business, and business is not in your way, you know."

On ordinary occasions the young fellow might have taken this for a compliment; not to be a man of business being half-way, as some suppose, to being a man of letters; but he was not pleased at his help or advice not being asked, it seemed to be treating him like a boy.

Mrs. Merridew was distressed to see him hurt, but not sorry that his sense of wrong

prevented him from further inquiry into this matter. She was, in fact, using a certain duplicity, of course for his own good, but she was not an adept at frauds, even pious frauds. As hens will fight with hawks for the sake of their little ones, so will mothers undertake, for their children's sake, rôles for which nature has not designed them. She had a little secret confided to her, but was not without a well-grounded apprehension that it might be worried out of her, or indeed that she might herself have disclosed it: and she was therefore glad that her Lawrence was too "huffy" about those business matters to be inquisitive.

When he came the next afternoon to Cheshunt Street by appointment he had quite got over that little soreness: was, to do him justice, not thinking of himself at all, but looking forward to his meeting with his cousin with no little embarrassment and confusion. He had been thinking of her a good deal, in the interim, and "putting two and two together"—all that he could recollect of her sayings and doings in relation to him—with a very decided inclination to join one and one. How was it possible he

could have been such a fool as to have been blind—well, to her merits, but especially to one of them, that steadfast and faithful regard for him, which she had shown in a hundred ways? How ungrateful he had been to her! How she had pleaded for him in vain with his persecutors as a child; how she had stood by him against them when he was a boy, and mitigated by her sympathy the evils she could not avert! How she had for his sake admitted Sir Charles Walden to terms of intimacy, and aided his interest in him by her gracious influence! This had caused even Mr. Percy, he remembered, to couple her name with that of the baronet in a fashion that had then aroused his indignation, but now filled him with shame. And then the thought of Kitty—which was the worst thought of all. It would only serve him right, and be the natural result of his idiotic conduct, if Ruth had learnt to forget him.

But Ruth seemed to remember him quite well. She had risen at mid-day, it appeared, though still very weak and tottery, especially to receive him, in the drawing-room; her withdrawal from the scene, where she had played so

prominent though unsought a part, had already benefited her, notwithstanding the physical fatigue of her long journey; her excessive nervousness had disappeared, and though her black attire heightened the delicacy of her appearance, he thought he had never seen her looking so lovely. She held out both her hands to him from the sofa without the slightest trace of embarrassment, and when, moved by an uncontrolled impulse, he stooped down and kissed her forehead, she took it as the most natural thing in the world, a circumstance that made him very wretched. Of course, she looked upon him as a cousin, or at the best a brother, and had no reason to feel astonishment. Neither of them referred to the cause that had brought them so unexpectedly together—Ruth, because the subject was hateful to her, and he, because it was of very small consequence compared with that which was in his mind. They spoke of Mr. Percy, a topic on which we may be sure they had but one opinion. Ruth's rapturous praise of him, though caused by circumstances of which he was wholly ignorant, excited in him no astonishment—first, because he had the greatest regard for his old

tutor; secondly, because he blessed him for the advice that had sent his cousin up to town; and, thirdly, because nothing she could have said would have seemed other than exactly just and fitting.

She asked him about his literary affairs, and he painted them in rose colour, for everything seemed to take that tint in her sympathising presence. Speaking of his own talents with unaccustomed modesty, he dwelt upon his capacity for work and the delight he took in it. "While admitting," he said, "the immense assistance I have received from Mr. Latham——"

"That was thanks to Sir Charles; we must not forget our magnificent friend," she put in with a touch of reproach, because he had not mentioned him. This was a terrible reminder, and chilled poor Lawrence's enthusiasm very much.

"I have reason to hope, however, that Mr. Latham now likes me on my own account."

"That is clear, my dear Lorry," she answered, "but we must not forget old friends. However, you tell me that you now feel confident of being able to make your own way."

"I do, though of course it is but a small way. My mother and you will of course come and live with me, and I shall at least be able to keep the wolf from our door."

"Then you propose to keep us as well as yourself by your pen?" she inquired softly, gazing at the floor lest he should see the unbidden tears that filled her eyes.

"Well, of course; that is what I always had in view. How could it be otherwise? It is only that matters have been precipitated, for which I am truly thankful. Do you think that having you near me, under the same roof, seeing you every day, hearing the sweet voice that has always been my greatest encouragement, will not be reward enough for a little extra work. Even if one is not idle, to live all alone with none to love one is—is—well, it is not like *this*."

No, it was certainly not like that. Her hand had somehow fallen into his, and he held it close; his voice was tremulous with passion, and though her own was silent, it was with the silence of assent.

"You must not think me selfish, darling,"

he went on, "though it is selfish, you must not think me mad though others will, if I dare to ask that some day—a long way off, when I shall have found myself capable of supporting you, not, alas, as I should wish to do, but in some comfort—you will let me call you my very own. Do you love me just a little, little bit?"

"Now, this will not do," said Mrs. Merridew, who, from an unfortunate habit acquired in her attendance on Popsy, had got into the way of entering a room without noise, "I will not have Ruth upset, Lawrence, or made miserable by anybody."

Ruth managed to say, though in a rather low and tearful voice, that so far from being miserable, she was exceedingly content with her lot in life.

Mrs. Merridew cast one sharp glance at the young people, and replied very unexpectedly, "And so you ought to be;" then added, much to her son's relief, "I am sure these lodgings are all we could wish for, and much better than we could have expected. Your friend, Miss Latham, is a dear, and has got

us quite what we wanted, don't you think so, Lorry?"

"I think they are very nice rooms, though not a bit nicer than Ruth—and you—deserve," he said.

"But they strike you, no doubt, as Mr. Latham (and he is a dear also) thought they would, as a little too expensive."

"I never thought anything of the kind," cried Lawrence, with a quick flush; "Mr. Latham had no right——"

"I will not have Lawrence teased or kept in the dark any longer, mother," exclaimed Ruth, with indignation. It had been usual with her when they were quite alone to call her aunt, who had, indeed, supplied the place of a parent to her, by this endearing title; but it had now a new significance. "He has been telling me how he intends to work his fingers to the bone and rack his brain, that you and I may be kept in comfort," she went on. "Mr. Latham has told us the same, but we knew it all before, did we not?"

"Yes, I knew I had a good son," said Mrs. Merridew, intending to be heroic and

philosophic, but crying very much, and looking much more like a British mother than a Roman one.

"A very wilful son, I am afraid," said Lawrence.

"You're a dear," said Mrs. Merridew, embracing him, "a *dear*. Tell him all about it, Ruth, for I can't, and that's flat."

Mrs. Merridew had certainly not the talent for diplomacy, nor even, as it seemed, the art of "breaking" things, which her niece had exhibited.

"Well, the fact is, Lorry dear," said Ruth, "that our good friend, Mr. Percy, in addition to all the other benefits he has conferred upon your mother and me, has found us a fortune. Poor Aunt Jerry, though neither he nor she thought she had really anything to leave, left a will behind her. It seems that in obedience to her husband's wishes she had never parted with certain shares in the Common Wheal mine, that has been shut up years, but is now being worked again with the most astonishing results. These shares, Mr. Percy tells me, are worth a great deal of money—more than £10,000."

"And has Aunt Jerry left all that money to mother?" exclaimed Lawrence delightedly.

"Well, to whom else should she leave it?" replied Ruth; "she was not likely to leave it to Aunt Jane, nor yet to grandfather, who have plenty of their own."

"Of course not. Nor yet to *me*," observed Lawrence smiling. "However, I bless her memory with all my heart."

"And I," said Ruth fervently.

"And I," said Mrs. Merridew. "She was a dear. So now you understand why your mother has established herself so luxuriously, and will have no need to pinch and screw for the rest of her life."

"This is good news, indeed," exclaimed Lawrence rapturously. "Though I still don't see," he added reproachfully, "why I was not made happy by it hours ago. Was it to try me? Was it to find out whether I was easily discouraged, or shrank from the responsibilities that love and duty equally imposed upon me?"

"No, it was not," cried Mrs. Merridew vehemently, almost sharply. "Ruth never

doubted you for a moment, and I—am I not your own mother ? "

" Thanks, darling," replied Lawrence, deeply moved. " I am quite satisfied, and do not seek to know any further." In his heart he thought it was Mr. Percy who had shown a want of confidence in him in this matter, but he could have forgiven him more than that. But it was not Mr. Percy, nor was the young fellow admitted even yet to the full possession of the family secret.

CHAPTER XLI.

ALL'S WELL.

As there was plenty of room in the Cheshunt Street house, it was only natural that Lawrence Merridew should exchange his quarters for his mother's roof; after which another occurrence became so much more natural, that it is hardly necessary to mention it. Since Lawrence could keep himself, with something over, by his pen, and his income, though absurdly small when compared with what we are so often told "it is impossible to marry upon," he did not long remain a bachelor.

The home of the young couple was with his mother, with whom Ruth had lived too long on terms of sympathy and affection to have any of those disagreements which perhaps take place between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law,

more often in fiction than in fact. At all events, they never had any.

It was in some respects an ideal household. Had it been far less luxurious, it would have seemed a seventh heaven to all three of them, compared with their experience of life at Hillsland. What they had was their own, not doled out by grudging and unloving hands, and every year, as Lawrence's brains became seasoned and his talents recognised, their small but sufficient means increased. There was nothing miraculous about the matter. To tell the honest truth, though Mrs. Merridew and Ruth were of another opinion, Lawrence Merridew was no genius. He was only a clever young fellow, with a decided taste for light literature. Neither fame nor fortune (to be called such) was within his reach, nor did he ever attain to them. But like scores, if not hundreds, of his fellows, he made in time considerable way in the calling he had chosen for himself; probably a larger income than he would have realised in any other more recognised and (so-called) safer profession for which he had no bent: certainly a much larger one than he would have made at Singapore.

And then the pleasure of it! Of course, there are other callings in which men take the utmost personal interest, nay, even a delight, and where the gains are far greater; but I question whether any can compare, for genuine satisfaction, with that of literature, when accompanied with moderate success. It is hard work, but somehow comes with ease; it introduces those who follow it to charming company; since they can take it with them wherever they go, they can go whither they please; and Lawrence took it home where he found most pleasure.

Above all—or what seemed to him above all—it requires no patrons. In a humble way—though he was not of a humble disposition, which, indeed, is seldom found in young gentlemen of letters—he was a very happy man. Whether he deserved to be so is for those who have read his history to decide; what is of more consequence, to his biographer at all events, he made Ruth happy. She was the very woman, indeed, he ought to have married. If he had married Kitty they would probably both have gone to the devil, though by different ways. Ruth with her "saving common sense" supplied

what was wanting in him. There was one matter, just at first, in which, if she had not been overruled, she would have committed an imprudence, but Mr. Percy saw to that. It was in connection with the secret which, as has been said, was not disclosed to Lawrence. Nor did he learn it till after he had married her. He found that his signature was necessary to a certain deed of settlement by which the sum of £11,000 was secured to his wife. "But this belongs to my mother," he said; but he was mistaken.

Aunt Jerry had left these Common Wheal shares to Ruth, as Mrs. Merridew had informed Mr. Latham in her letter; it was necessary to do so to account for what would otherwise have seemed an unreasonable extravagance in her requirements in the way of lodging; and besides, she owed it to him, considering the trouble she was giving him (which his great kindness to her son alone encouraged her to do) to confide to him these circumstances. Out of this came, strangely enough, Ruth's unexpected readiness to accept her lover's proposal, which, to say the truth, was something of an agreeable surprise even to himself. Mr. Latham's sisters were very

communicative to the newcomers, and talked to them, as was natural, very freely about Lawrence. They had never heard a word of Kate Salesby, and always imagined that the *tendresse* they knew him to entertain was for his cousin, and they took it for granted that she was aware of it.

It was no doubt a very welcome piece of news to her (nor was it difficult for her to persuade herself that it was no news), and scarcely less so to Mrs. Merridew, the desire of whose heart had always been that Lawrence's affections should have turned in that direction, if only, alas! the thing had been practicable, which now, by this windfall, it had got to be. On the other hand, Mr. Latham at once perceived the injudiciousness of letting Lawrence into the secret. He had had too recent an experience of that young gentleman's independence of character and resentment of pecuniary favours, not to foresee an obstruction to the course of true love in the fact of Ruth being thus well provided for. Indeed, if the editor had known the whole truth, that up to that time Lawrence had not thought of Ruth as his wife at all, he would have had

very good reason to conceal from Lawrence her accession to fortune. He could hardly have made that sudden proposal to her on finding she was an heiress. And, even as it was, Mr. Latham feared that the young fellow's false pride might interpose between him and happiness. Mr. Latham was of an independent nature himself, and had secretly very much applauded his young friend's disinclination to take advantage of Sir Charles's generous offer, even before the baronet's conduct had made all obligation impossible. But the present circumstances were wholly different. It seemed monstrous to him that an unexpected prosperity should part two loving hearts; and what also weighed with him was the reflection that a moderate competence was the very thing that Lawrence stood in need of. There is a great deal of nonsense talked about the matter. Whatever objections may be urged against a small independence, they apply with greater force against a large one (though nobody objects to *that*); while it is, at all events, greatly preferable to having nothing at all.

Moreover, it would not, as is generally said

of its possessors, make Lawrence idle, for he loved his work for its own sake; and, indeed in literature, of all professions, something to fall back upon in the case of illness or ill-health is, like learning (only very much better), "most excellent."

Mr. Latham was therefore most persistent in advocating secrecy upon this point, and neither Mrs. Merridew nor her niece was in a position to oppose this view. And thus it happened that Lawrence married in ignorance of his having drawn a pecuniary prize in Ruth, independently of her own merits. When he had done it, he was obliged to put up with that drawback, for fanciful as the reasons for divorce are said to have become, nobody has yet put away his wife on the ground of her being an heiress.

There was another secret between the young couple, not so directly revealed, and, indeed, though it was to some extent common property, seldom alluded to by either of them, namely, that dead and gone *tendresse* of Master Lawrence for Kitty. I say "Master Lawrence," because Ruth always spoke of it—whatever she may have thought of it—as a mere boyish folly. If there

was anything serious in it, it was Kitty's fault, who, it had been abundantly manifested, was capable of going considerable lengths in flirtation. This was not quite Lawrence's view. They also entertained a difference of opinion as regarded that patron of letters, Sir Charles Walden.

Lawrence could never forgive his conduct with respect to Kitty, and indirectly it must be owned to *him*, whereas Ruth persisted in picturing him as more or less of a victim, an idea which would have amused that gentleman himself exceedingly. Lawrence playfully attributed this charitable conception of Sir Charles's character to the tender friendship that he had once exhibited for Ruth, but as a professed student of human nature it is probable that he privately set it down to the right cause. In his heart of hearts, even when denouncing him, he never forgot the friendship he had shown him, fully recognised it as having been genuine, and even secretly acknowledged that but for it he might have been at Singapore.

In this world the very last things that may be expected to do so sometimes work together

for our good. Lawrence saw a good deal of the world in his time, but in the picture gallery of his memory Sir Charles Walden always remained the most remarkable figure. He never saw him again, nor Kitty either.

This was also the case with his grandfather and Aunt Jane; to have met them would have been hardly less embarrassing, and in all senses he could well afford to dispense with their acquaintance. Lawrence Merridew and his wife had soon plenty of friends, though the Lathams and Mr. Percy (who, by-the-bye, married them) remained the chief. In any case, however, the ex-Commissioner ("the Rajah," the "Satrap") was not the great man he had been; notwithstanding his horror of gambling, intensified no doubt by the examination of certain documents of his son Robert, which astonished him very much, he fell from his pride of place, through dabbling in mining shares that did not turn out so well as those which had been "stuck to" by Aunt Jerry. He had to leave the Hall, and what was worse, to take Aunt Jane with him, a person hardly fitted to be a cheerful companion in adversity. Hillsland knows them no more;

but it has a permanent record of one of the family in a very handsome monument erected in the churchyard by his sorrowing widow to that "best of husbands," Robert Stratton, Esq., J.P., D.L.

THE END.

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